

MONSTER

Monsterholic



1

GHOST MIKAWA

Illustration by

RAG MIWANO

HOLIC



Monsterholic

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Monster holic

These youths who are more than monsters
and less than human run through the night
in a government-designated slum.

AUTHOR ——— **GHOST MIKAWA**
ILLUSTRATOR ——— **RAG MIWANO**

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CONFIDENTIAL



**Beast
Tech**

Beast Tech Inc.

Business overview:
Pharmaceuticals, vaccine development,
real estate, and various other businesses.

Manufacture and sale of Monster Tonic,
a liquid that turns humans into beasts.



GETSU RAISAN

WEREWOLF

REIJI KASUMI

VAMPIRE

MEI MEZUKI


KEI KAKIBA

Monster
holic

“Does the udon
taste better since
I’m paying?”

“Way better.
Especially
when I think
about you sitting
there hungry.”

“Don’t season
your meal with
my frustrations.”



For an instant,
the mist coalesced
into the colorless
silhouette of a
young man, like
a black-and-white
ink painting.
Then the color
snapped back into
place as his body
became solid again.

“By the categorization
on my Specials
Management Ledger,
I’m a vampire,
but our boss says
that I’m actually
something else.”

REIJI KASUMI
Special Permanent Beast

VAMPIRE

1

GHOST MIKAWA

Illustration by

RAG MIWANO

Monsterholic

 **YEN
ON**
New York



Copyright

Monsterholic 1

GHOST MIWANO

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Infinite Outcomes, and at the End of It All

Modern society is made up of an extraordinary accumulation of *outcomes*.

The dice are rolled thousands, millions of times even—mostly over trivial things.

What you eat, what you like, who you love, how you die.

Every time you make a decision and take action, the dice of fate roll.

Like the fluttering of butterfly wings.

Modern society is made up of these dice, rolled by so many nameless people.

This is Kyoto, Akitsushima.

If the roll of the dice had been different, this capital and island nation may have been called Tokyo, Japan.

Their two World Wars were followed by defeat. With the threat of division due to the Cold War, innovations in information communication technology seemed to shrink the world. It was a miraculous era where the internet closed the gap between people everywhere, making them like neighbors.

However, an epidemic shredded the complex web of trade and distribution, and threw smoothly running gears into disarray.

It became the greatest pandemic in history, dividing the world into before and after the event.

It was hell, with hundreds of millions dead all over the planet, and humanity could even have been annihilated.

And it wasn't only illness—the collapse of the intricately interwoven network of trade destroyed the economies of nations that weren't self-sustainable, reintroducing starvation and poverty into previously abundant communities, which in turn resurrected the fear of war.

The threat of war, which began in Europe, killed the global economy, put an end to sustainable energy efforts, brought back fossil fuels and trade blocs, and created an era of turmoil where nations became more isolationist and only cooperated with close allies.

And at the end of it all—

There was Akitsushima, which became an extremely regulated society to enforce the quarantine system said to establish the highest standard in the world.

The people were treated like cattle, connected by an insular social media community with mandatory participation, and they struggled through their days, living life as if catching their breath after hurtling between poverty and prosperity.

There was but one salvation in this world, and the people hungered for it.

It was in the gospel of Beast Tech, the corporate giant primarily responsible for the world's quarantine system.

They produced the ultimate release, sold only in limited government-designated areas.

Experience it yourself!

It was 350 ml of Libra, sloshing in a can with a striking design.

People would pull the tab and gulp it down—then dance in celebration of the intense flavor.

Unchain themselves in the Masquerade.

In this city, all sorts of people turned off the devices that tracked them, removed their masks for disease prevention, and reverted to animalistic behavior.

It was a place to throw off the yoke of society—a necessary evil where vice and violence were allowed.

The citizens gathered, captivated by this black hole within the ultra-controlled society.

In this lawless city, they drank freedom to indulge in base instincts and dance in a wild revelry.

This liquid—Monster Tonic—turned humans into actual beasts.

It had a rich cola flavor. They would gulp down the liquid despite its chemical aftertaste and become people with the characteristics of animals—at times

tigers, sometimes lambs, occasionally wolves—and put a mask over their hearts.

Ignorant of each other's names or backgrounds, all were just unidentifiable beasts.

What immoral acts entice them, even though they are forbidden? What pleasures are withheld from them in the outside world?

To draw away the partitions dividing them, in a wild and crazy revelry they drink enough liquor to bathe in. They have one-night stands without feeling responsibility, or gamble ridiculous sums of money as if seeking out their own ruin.

They are free to do it all; that is the Masquerade.

It is the theme park from hell. In this government-designated slum, a certain rumor was going around.

"I hear there's something that'll get you higher than anything else."

The greatest of miracle drugs, providing a high far surpassing that of the drink that turned them into common beasts.

In the corners of clandestine networks and to pass the time at work or school, people spread plausible-sounding rumors about the Mythic Tonic, thought to transform users into legendary creatures long gone extinct.

To get to the point.

The ultimate freedom does exist, and having been scattered through the city, the ripples of its effects will bring about tragedy and comedy.

This is the story of monsters born in an extremely restricted society.

A legend about youths who make their way, living earnest lives while enjoying their meager freedom to the fullest—begins now.



Chapter 1

Hit-and-Run Centaur

It was evening, on a certain desolate street corner.

Countless air conditioner units were installed on concrete walls that looked like they'd been built fifty years ago.

Fans spun audibly on rusty bearings, whipping up moldy-smelling warm air.

Bags of garbage that seemed to have been thrown out of windows were piled up between the buildings, forming a layer that looked like a rotten rack of ribs, and the white fermented gas that rose up from it wavered in the breeze of the air conditioner units, hovering there like ghosts.

This city was a garbage dump.

A sanitation company did rounds on the main streets, but two streets beyond that, there were rows of abandoned buildings the landlords had neglected, with "guests" who enjoyed shady activities squatting in former shops and residences.

Since the area had no property management, the garbage and excrement generated by squatters' lifestyles would pile up without being addressed by public services, and it looked as if it was simply left to sit like well-pickled vegetables.

"Haah, haah, haah, haah...haah!!"

And there, as if swimming through the flood of garbage bags, a wolf was running.

The designer suit that would certainly have garnered respect outside of this town was pitifully dirtied. Thick fluffy fur was exposed on his chest under his shirt, the buttons pulled so tight it seemed they would pop.

On his palms were soft pads, and fur covered his face. His tongue lolled out in an expression of panic and fear, and he panted like an animal as he struggled desperately, pushing his way through the garbage mounds.

"I never should've come! I shouldn't have come here! This stupid place! Stupid place! Stupid!" he cried out in an unseemly manner, displaying none of the toughness one might imagine from the term *wolf*.

His belly was plump and round just like the Big Bad Wolf in picture books, all fattened up from tucking away a number of billy goats, and it swayed as the

two-legged wolf in a fancy suit made a scene, pushing through garbage as he fled.

If you were to describe his ratios, he was part human, part wolf: 70 percent wolf and 30 percent human.

“Eeep?!”

The man who could only be described as a fat wolf turned around.

Kadunk! Kadunk! Kadunk kadunk...!

Something pursued the fat wolf, sending garbage bags flying and pressing U-shaped marks into the asphalt.

Under the light of a dying streetlamp, the shadows were long—so long, just like a scene out of an old black-and-white movie.

A four-legged shadow stretched out on a wall covered with the lumps of countless air conditioner units.

“I—I’m sorry! I’m sorry! So...don’t kill me!!” The fat wolf let out a heart-wrenching yelp as he practically drowned in the garbage heap.

But the creature casting the four-legged shadow was unmoved by his plea, gaining on the man at a trot.

If this had been *outside*, then public safety forces would have mobilized, informed by the security cameras on every street corner.

The use of force, with the possibility of even heavy firearms, may have saved the fat wolf.

And in fact, he did not abandon that hope until the very end, pathetically seeking help, begging for mercy.

“I was just fooling around!! You’re allowed to do anything here! I heard that you could do anything, without people finding out your identity, so I, so I, so I...!!” His words came out hoarse at the end, becoming sobs. “I—I wasn’t serious! You were out here for that, too, right?! Walking around here looking like that, that’s basically asking for it, right? It’s not my fault, I—I!”

The warm wind blew. It wasn’t the smell of oil and mold vented by the air

conditioners—it was a raw, bloody gust.

And it came blowing from far above the fat wolf's head, from a height of over ten feet.

“Erk?!”

The fat wolf trembled, and the moment he turned around—

The four-legged beast reared up, raising its giant, U-shaped hooves.

Splat!

“Aaaaaaecccccccccccccccccccc!”

A nonsensical scream.

The fat wolf was half buried in garbage bags.

As if it had been the creature's aim, it crushed and then ripped off the fat wolf's arm.

The wolf was flattened to the asphalt, blood and gore spreading around its stomped-on limb. His shoulder just barely remained, and upon seeing the dirty ivory-white bone and severed flesh and muscle, the fat wolf just stared for a moment.

“Huh? Is that—really—my arm—ah—it's—geh...!!”

The magic drug that temporarily transformed the human body into that of a beast—Monster Tonic—strengthened the body considerably.

It not only enlarged muscles, but it also had effects on the brain that suppressed pain, granting a tenacity and vitality equivalent to that of a wild animal. But at this point of injury, such benefits...

They were torture, just preventing him from dying easily.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

With an expression of disbelief, the fat wolf tried to pick up his dismembered arm.

When his claws caught the sleeve of his suit, his face contorted as he fought back tears, and the pursuer behind him raised its front legs once again,

stomping on the fat wolf's hunched-over back.

"Gah! Ack...?!"

His spine broke with a loud crack, and then all the air in his lungs was forced out in a dry *whff*.

Hooves acted as the weapon wielded against him. But they were not cloven hooves like a cow's or a pig's.

Described simply, they were single-piece hooves transformed to cover all the toes of a foot, characteristic of the order Perissodactyla. These hooves were dyed a vivid red with fresh blood, as if they had stepped in a puddle.

Bruh-huh-huh...!

Then there was the sound of a whinny from vibrating nostrils.

It rang with joy—an emotional sound that a horse would emit.

With a gesture that indicated glee and excitement, *it* was about to cruelly stomp out a life.

"He...lp...me—egh?!"

...Splat!!

His pleas for his life ended in vain, and like a fallen egg...

...his strange-looking skull, like that of a canine and human combined, was shattered, its contents spilling out.

With a few tons of pressure, the hooves crushed the wolf man, and his body, now ground meat, was buried in garbage, sinking into the fetid putrefied mass that fell out of the torn bags.

It was big.

Though its legs were buried halfway in the mountain of garbage that now covered the fat wolf's whole body, it was standing up straight.

Its fine, short brown hair was completely different from fluffy canine fur. And its four legs, stepping firmly on the asphalt, were thick and long, less like a living creature and more like sturdy heavy machinery.

At a glance, it was a horse.

But where a horse's head typically would be there was a girl's upper body—featuring a distinct six-pack and a full chest with pale nipples just barely covered by a torn undershirt, hardly able to withstand the swelling from within.

The track jacket she wore was filled to bulging, like hams straining against twine.

The front zipper was open all the way, but even so, the garment looked too tight, as if an adult had put on child's clothes. Illuminated under the forlorn light of the streetlamp, dots of blood spatter could be seen.

A centaur.

This fantastical form, a human and horse connected at the torso, melted into the darkness of the city, indistinct.

“Haah, haah, haah, haah, haah, haah, haah, haah, haah... ♪”

She panted heavily.

Along with that unconcealable, excited rhythm, her lips, barely visible, were upturned.

Within Natsukibara is the Kyoto Masquerade, where the legal drug Monster Tonic turns people into beasts. The special district was shaken by the killer “hit-and-run centaur,” who gleefully pranced away.

“This is nasty. It's all sticky and gross.”

“3D scan and digital save complete. Begin body retrieval.”

The pair who had come to the crime scene scanned the crushed body and the traces of the perpetrator.

Light ran across the scene like a tongue, recording the crime scene as precisely digitized data and storing it.

The mobile computer, packed into an impact-resistant case, would normally be set up to instantly send data and carry out analysis at a specialized department, but they couldn't do that in this town, where almost all signal lines were dead.

“How can they expect us to take back the data by hand, in this day and age? This is too low-tech...”

“Historically and globally, the fastest method of super large capacity data transfer has been to physically transmit the storage media via a transportation system, or so I’ve heard.”

“But this isn’t even that big a file. Ugh well, what can you do? It’s good we at least have a job.”

In work clothes and goggles, wearing thick plastic gloves to be sanitary, a nondescript duo picked up the remains, which were already emitting an intense stench, and strained to put them in a bag as they chatted.

“Will this smell wash out? We’re transferring today, right? Aren’t you nervous?”

“Not really. It’s half for work.”

“Ah, no fair. You can’t be the only one acting so damn cool. You’re always like that.”

“It’s not an act; I’m just—”

One of the pair in work gear shifted his mask aside.

His silhouette was that of a human, and small smile of delight crossed his lips.

“I am excited—it seems we can finally be normal.”

They were at the bottom of the ecosystem, like decomposers, and had the company name **FANTASTIC SWEEPER** emblazoned on their work clothes.

Dressed like a cleaning staff one might see on a street corner or in a building somewhere, they calmly went to work.

“You don’t think it’ll be hard to both stop this mess and make a cool entrance in high school?”

“The former is work; the latter is life. It goes without saying which is more important.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But for us, if we slack off on the first, the latter will be ruined.”

One of the pair had overalls filled to bursting with fluffy fur, and he wore a mask.

The individual had a human form with a beastlike silhouette hidden beneath his rough work clothes. Like some dark version of Santa Claus, he grumbled as he shouldered the big bag packed with the crushed body, then started walking through the city, where dawn was nigh.

“Let’s go, partner. I need a shower and a change of clothes. I can’t take this anymore.”

“Yeah.”

Side by side, the pair carried the body and their equipment over their shoulders, heaving along their information.

They were not police officers. From the tone of their voices, one could tell they were teenage boys, overflowing with unconcealable youth.

“Let’s catch the culprit already so we can hang out. I’ve got some ideas.”

“Sorry, but go on ahead of me to work on the investigation. I’ll be submitting documents first.”

“You got it. So like...”

The victim’s face and background were unknown—it was the body of someone who had died while transformed into a beast.

His expensive-looking suit, wallet, wristwatch, shoes, and even his bloody socks had all been scavenged by miscreants lurking nearby the scene, and he had been packed into the bag basically naked, a pitiful lump of flesh without a name.

“Die *out there*, and it’s a big deal. If you die in here, it’s just one sheet of paperwork. Why would he come to a place like this?”

“Adults on the outside must be bored,” one told the other, remembering the document template that he would fill in once he got back to the office.

If he dissected the formal language, it wasn’t even a criminal case—it was a report for cleaning work.

A big hunk of trash was lying there. We cleaned it up. The end.

They were so careless about it—that was all he needed to write on the report. Human lives were heavy, but beast lives were lighter than trash.

However, someone had to clean it up, or it would be a real eyesore—just like the garbage.

Carrying the man who had died like a fool over their shoulders, the cleaners vanished around the street corner and into the morning mist.

MONSTER HOLIC

These youths who are more than monsters
and less than human run through the night
in a government-designated slum.

AUTHOR
GHOST MIKAWA

ILLUSTRATOR
RAG MIWANO



— 01 Specials —

Though time passed and eras changed, the train station still had a characteristic smell.

The dawn of the steam locomotive filled with coal and smoke was long past. When the train came to a stop at the platform, disinfectant was sprayed throughout, and faceless people pushed through the fine mist as they disembarked.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The endless patter of their footsteps sounded as they walked without even a bit of idle chitchat.

For the majority during commuting hours—office workers and students—the rate of mask wearing was 100 percent. The disposable masks developed in recent years adhered to the skin, reading the wearer’s skin color and adjusting to camouflage onto the wearer’s face.

People called this crowd face—covering the mouth and nose, everything exposed aside from the eyes, with an ultrathin film—and it almost perfectly shut out droplets and viruses. Made to adhere so closely that they didn’t obstruct facial recognition, they could be worn even in official situations.

The security cameras installed on the platforms and in trains tracked the routes of these crowd faces.

The cameras were called the Eyes of God, and they observed everyone’s movements in real time, 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

The surveillance system had originated to prevent disease transmission via contact tracing. Though at first people had clamored about intrusions on privacy and protection of personal information, they’d given in under the pressure of social media hysteria demanding tough measures, and a few years had passed since implementation.

Beep, beep, beep...!

One of the devices among those disembarking rang.

The people parted to the sides all at once, opening a path.

With smiles pasted on behind their crowd face masks, as if they were about to applaud—

“...Hmph.”

A single girl appeared beyond the parted crowd.

She wore the uniform of Akanebara High, a municipal school near the station. With wild hair that stuck out in all directions, she looked around the area with a gaze that wasn't cute so much as willful, then lowered her head a bit.

Scree...!

Tires squealing, the wheelchair she sat in moved through the parted crowd.

Her legs, peeking out from under her miniskirt, had well-conditioned muscle, like an athlete in the picture of health. But all the people around her clearing the way proved that this was not some kind of feigned disability.

The hidden camera in the train ceiling focused on her face.

Synchronizing with the device she carried, and using facial recognition, it analyzed her personal information.

“Citizen registration number XXXXXX Kyoto Akanebara Municipal High School, class 2-A.

“Mei Mezuki, achievement and penalty record: first place in the municipal middle school inter-high track and field tournament, 1500 meter.”

The social media on her personal device was activated based on her encrypted citizen registration number.

The system browsed through tweets about her daily life and images of her proudly winning the crown as a track athlete.

“Spinal injury due to traffic accident, right leg paralyzed.

“Lifestyle support requirement: level B.”

The notification flew to the devices of the people aboard her train car.

The social management support system Eyes of God recommended support to the socially and physically infirm.

Those who complied were certain to earn points for being model citizens.

Ding-ding! ♪

“Congratulations. Lifestyle support contribution B accomplished.

“Credit score +1. This will be added to your social trust level—”

They must not have turned off their notifications.

The mechanical voices of devices and alerts of additions to their credit score pinged from everywhere in the crowd.

“Go right ahead!”

“If you’re in trouble, miss, I’d be happy to help you out?”

“...I don’t need it.”

The crowd’s masks covered half their faces. But that slight wrinkle couldn’t hide the smiles behind them.

It was just one point, but still one point. In this ultra-controlled society, the credit score was the basis for all facets of activities in society, from tax deductions and subsidies to credit cards and loan limits.

If they could earn points just by getting out of the way, then of course they would do it with a smile.

“...Thank...you.”

Even when she thanked them with blatantly ingenuine and forced enthusiasm

—

The certainty that they had done a good deed made the crowd answer brightly.

““““You’re welcome!””””

Looking around at these people with mistrust, Mei rolled along in her manual wheelchair—a rarely seen apparatus these days—to get off the train car.

Of course, even without her saying anything, the ramp appeared automatically. No matter where she went, she would never have to deal with crowds. No matter how packed it was, the way would open, and bright smiles and notifications of added points would ring out continuously.

♪ Ding-ding! ♪ Ding-ding! ♪ Ding-ding! ♪ Ding-ding! ♪ Ding-ding! ♪ ...Ding-ding! ♪

Breaking out of the crowds and finally leaving the station premises...

“...Sooo annoying!” Mei Mezuki howled, venting all her built-up frustration.

The sky was blue, the wind was clear, and the street was beautiful, without a single piece of litter on the ground.

Since she had come at a slightly different time than usual, it was off-peak commuting hours, and there was no sign of anyone.

So there was no need to keep suppressing her emotions, and she turned the dark feelings that had risen into words and spat them out.

“If you’re going to pretend to be nice, at least mute your notifications...!”

Now, in the world where she lived, anonymity was a privilege.

Everyone lived *pretending* to be kind.

Kree, kree, kree...!

The girl’s body fat percentage was in the single digits. Her arms were so toned and muscular they defied female stereotypes.

Those arms moved along a completely manual wheelchair with no motorized assistance at all—an uncommon sight in recent years.

With sweat beading on her neck, she looked up the hill and saw the school’s wall at the top of that steep slope.

“...Phew...kuh...ngh...!”

Clenching her teeth, she clasped the wheels, and right as she was about to firmly grab the hand rims...

Sweat dripped from under her sleeve and ran along her palm, which slipped.

“Wha—?!” she cried out, not very girlishly. Her hand slid off the rim, and she

lost control of the tires.

Following the law of inertia, she started rolling down the steep hill—straight backward.

Oh crap, I'm gonna die...?!

If she failed to get up the hill and rolled down it, then a regular roadway with lots of traffic waited for her at the bottom.

Suddenly, she heard car engines and other traffic sounds. Even if self-driving cars had auto-breaks, it was uncertain whether they could respond in time to something unusual flying out at them. Worst case, she would get hit.

...Ah. But...

Her hand, which was about to lower the brake lever, went slack.

Oh well...?

The tension left her clenched jaw.

Her hand suddenly released the brake lever, as if she'd given up on everything in the world.

Her wheelchair was rolling. The world around her flew by—

Scree!

“—?!”

She suddenly stopped.

Reflexively, she pushed her body back as the sudden stop nearly flung her from the seat, then she turned her head.

In her unfocused field of view, the first thing she saw was...

...a car going by.

Someone had cut in to stop her as her wheels started going off the curb of the sidewalk.

If they had been a moment late...

“...!!”

A shiver went up her spine, and a cold sweat beaded on her skin as if she'd had a bucket of water splashed over her.

It was the return of a feeling she'd had before. It hadn't been that long ago—just a few months. She'd been with a younger student in her club, having a trivial chat... She recalled that it was right after she'd made some disinterested sound in response to something about an idol.

A fully manual car came crashing toward them from the side. The sports car had a stick-shift drive system that was considered dated. That feeling of being sent flying hard and her spine bending as she was struck...

I died, that time.

She had actually experienced her death. Mei felt that she had died for a moment, back then.

She had ultimately survived and was now unable to run. She'd gotten surgery and been through physical rehabilitation, and with the power of cutting-edge medicine, she had managed to recover.

"Wow, so lucky that I was saved. I've got to cherish life and maintain a positive attitude...!"

Of course, she couldn't feel that way.

If I can't run anymore, I have nothing.

She had put everything into that one thing. She just loved to run. She had nothing else.

She lost her legs and wound up an empty shell, and now wherever she went, it was *pings* and *dings*.

Chased around by those pushy notifications, on the receiving end of that smirking pity.

Living out the rest of her life with thanks for their much-appreciated goodwill.

She had realized just how pathetic that was.

"I..." She played it tough. "...never asked anyone to save me."

"..."

The person clasping the handles of her wheelchair, who had leaped out to block her way with his own body as shield, was a boy.

He had to be about the same age as her or a little younger. His hair was divided into black on one side and white on the other in a unique asymmetry, a ratio of about seven to three. *What a strange fashion choice...*, she thought, but she couldn't see any other decoration or particular style in his appearance.

He wore the boy's uniform of Akanebara High. His face was covered with a black polyurethane mask, but the only people who used such an ineffective item against airborne droplets these days were those from rural areas.

He had a dull, vacant look in his eyes and pale skin. His cold facial features were frankly quite handsome, but unfortunately, that was no consolation at all to the apathetic Mei.

"Don't butt in on my life," Mei said, and then she turned around and looked up.

As the boy's white hair stirred in the breeze, the tips of his bangs seemed to disintegrate slightly.

Huh? Was that...my imagination?

Just slightly, like incense smoke.

The white tips emitted just the faintest haze, letting a spicy scent mingle in the wafting air.

It wasn't at all a bad smell. In fact, it had a mature vibe, like high-class perfume.

What do you call that? I bet girls are all over him.

But one part bothered her quite a lot. His face was pretty, but there was a hint of sorrow in his eyes.

"You seem like the type of pretty boy who'd be kept by a rich older woman," popped out of her mouth thoughtlessly.

The black-and-white-haired boy made a face and finally answered, "...Stay out of my business. Don't you have an escort?"

“I don’t have anyone like that.”

“Oh. So...”

Now here it comes. Mei steeled herself.

No matter how aggressive she became, ever since she’d stopped being able to walk, nobody had so much as snapped at her.

She’d always had a sharp tongue. Mei had often had quarrels and arguments with her friends, and even she was aware that her impatience was a flaw, but she still saw it as an indispensable part of herself.

Putting on a tough act and preparing to clash, she was ready to be hated.

But since losing her legs...

They all just smile sheepishly and don’t even...!

Not a single person had actually listened to her.

They wouldn’t get angry. They would just say “The poor thing” or “It must be tough” or “That’s rough” with pity, generously forgiving the poor idiot who was upset—and while they were at it, they would earn points with more kindness.

It’s such bullshit. I’m not a points coupon!

That was what Mei anticipated as she glared up at him.

But the boy who had saved her did not react at all how she’d expected.

“...You’re a piece of shit.”

“Huh?” she responded clumsily, taken aback.

The boy’s eyes, looking back at her as he firmly gripped the handles of the wheelchair, held no pity at all. In fact, she could even sense a fed-up hostility, the sort you’d direct at a naughty child.

“You’re free to die if you like, but if they hit you, it’ll ruin the life of whoever was in that car.”

“...Ah.” Having her blind spot thrust at her, her temper cooled.

“I won’t tell you to be thankful, but don’t involve total strangers. That’s a bother to others.”

“Lecturing me when we just met? *You’re* a total stranger...” Mei pushed back against his remark but felt a sting of pain in her heart.

I’m the one at fault here.

She was aware. She understood it. Yeah of course, she had pushed herself too far and made a mistake and just about died, and then got saved, and instead of thanking him, she’d snapped at him and then complained, the worst kind of—

“...I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I was at fault...!”

“So you *can* apologize. Amazing.”

“Shu— Sorry!” Her reason just barely won over, and she was able to apologize. “I’m irritated for my own personal reasons. It was wrong of me to take things out on you when you saved me. Also...thank you for saving me.”

“You seem pretty nasty, but I guess you’re not a total asshole.”

“Asshole...? You’ve got quite the mouth yourself.”

“I just treat people appropriately, depending on the person. You’re the type who doesn’t like politeness and thinks of it as meaningless, aren’t you?”

“...”

He was right, so Mei couldn’t say a thing and stayed silent.

Then there was pressure from behind, and the black-and-white-haired boy gripping the handles started up the hill.

“Hey, what’re you doing? Are you the type with a fetish for doing girls from behind?”

“I’m nice. Though, I don’t want to waste my energy.” In an exasperated tone that seemed quite genuine, the black-and-white-haired boy continued, “If I let you go up this steep hill alone and then you roll down and die or get hit, then that means disaster for someone. The safest thing is to stop that sort of stupid chain of events at the source.”

“...Hmm. I dunno.” In the wheelchair, Mei laid her chin in the palm of her hand with her elbow propped up on her knee, which was motionless like a stick. “So you’re playing the bad guy to make it seem like, ‘No, I’m not like them; I’m

not one of those fake do-gooders!”

“What?”

“Bastards like that will try to make themselves look good, earning points with a sullen smirk on their face. I see that type sometimes.”

“That’s such a shockingly terrible thought to have. It’s been a long time since I last met a girl this nasty.” He seemed less angry and looked more curious, as if he’d discovered a new life-form.

With him giving her that look, Mei made a dismissive noise as she said apathetically, “Oh, sorry I’m not the sort of weak girl who’ll politely thank you.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Well, leaving that aside...” He went up the hill surprisingly swiftly, with a smoothness one wouldn’t expect from someone pushing a whole person.

After bringing her to a flat spot near the school that was at the top of the hill, the black-and-white-haired boy let go of the handles.

“It’s not like I want to be thanked. I just did it because I wanted to. It would be a hassle to get some weird thanks. I didn’t treat you so badly, by my standards. I think if you were like that with anyone else, they’d snap at you.”

“How generous. You say that, but right now, you’re getting a whole bunch of points on social media, aren’t you?”

In this extremely surveilled society, social media registered under one’s identity and credit information were completely linked.

Do good acts and gain more credit. Conversely, crimes and nuisance would subtract points, affecting every facet of your life in society. If your credit was high, then you were at advantage with your credit limit and tax deductions, while the reverse put you at a disadvantage.

“Isn’t that nice; you saved a life. Contributing to a lifestyle support level B, you’ll get an additional fifty points for sure.”

“Will I?”

“Of course. The limit on your credit card will definitely go up,” she said, turning back.

Having released the handles of her wheelchair, the boy started walking leisurely toward the school building.

Mei turned her hand rims and pushed her wheelchair along—then noticed something felt off. “Your smartphone isn’t pinging. It’s on silent?”

Make way for a poor wheelchair user in the station, +1 point.

Just that sparked dramatic pinging everywhere, but she didn’t hear anything like that from the black-and-white-haired boy.

As a rule, personal notifications on devices couldn’t be completely turned off. You could put it on silent mode to eliminate the noise, but then it would vibrate, and everyone around would still know.

“Of course it’s not gonna ring. ’Cause I don’t have one.”

“...Whaaat?!”

No way, no way, no way.

What the black-and-white-haired boy was saying was so weird, she repeated *No way* to herself three times.

“You’re kidding me. Is there anyone these days who can live without a smartphone?”

“I manage with cash and paper documents.”

Even now, when just about all government services were online, there were service windows that dealt in paper.

It was only a few old people and eccentrics who used them, and people often called for streamlining and elimination of these services.

“They do accept it for the bare minimum. It really helps.”

“You just turned off your notifications, didn’t you? With some sort of sketchy modification.”

“I don’t have those kinds of skills. And anyway, if I could do *that*, I could commit all sorts of crimes.”

Her tires squeaked along.

Lining up to walk by Mei's side without meaning to, the boy groped in his pocket and thrust an unfamiliar device at her.

"This is my phone."

"...Whoa...what is this...?!"

Dirtied with finger marks all over the surface and with paint chipping off was a phone that folded in two.

There had been photos of them in the textbook for technological history that they'd studied at school...

"This is one of those flip phones, right?" said Mei. "They used them before our generation... Can they access social media?"

"No. You don't get points, either. But whatever."

...Snap.

As if opening a notebook, he unfolded the flip phone with a practiced gesture.

The LCD screen was tiny. It was just barely functional, and the impact-protection film was in tatters.

Looking like it would break at any moment, it blinked, then displayed the authentication screen.

That part was the same as Mei's.

On the display, when someone turned on a smartphone, and it processed the personal authentication—

Citizen registration number [redacted] Kyoto Akanebara Municipal High School, class 2-A

Reiji Kasumi, achievement and penalty record: [redacted]

Special mention—Special Permanent Beast: vampire.

"...Huh?"

Not understanding any of that, Mei's thoughts went blank.

He brought his face close to hers, hooking a finger under his mask. There was something almost sensual in his pretty face.

His beautiful lips twisted slightly, letting porcelain fangs peek out the corners of his smile.

“It’s enough for a dog collar, though.”

“...Just what are you...?!”

The black-and-white-haired boy and the girl in the wheelchair. One was smirking, the other clearly expressing wariness.

On the way to school that morning, the two of them glared at one another for a while.

*

“Long ago, in the age of gods and heroes...huh.”

Akanebara Municipal was a very typical public school.

The facilities were the newest. The building was large, and there were a lot of students enrolled, but not many people were around.

Since remote classes had become more common to prevent the spread of infection, each class and year would take shifts attending in person, so the only opportunities all students had to meet each other were the entrance ceremony and graduation ceremony.

That meant the school building felt rather deserted.

The day had come for class 2-A to attend, and in the very back row of the classroom, which was easy for a wheelchair to access, Mei Mezuki was muttering to herself while flipping through the pages of the textbook displayed on her tablet.

Being entirely devoted to athletics, she had basically no interest in history.

For tests, she had just memorized important words and phrases without knowing what they meant and written them down, so she hadn’t truly learned anything.

“Humanity would have been destroyed, if they hadn’t fought desperately...so it says. Sounds like bullshit.”

But that was the past.

A witch who could turn a person to stone, or a dark lord who could kill with just a glare—such things were long gone.

Questionable artifacts like fossils and battered weapons, or relics like fingers and pieces of hair were apparently kept at museums around the world, but none of it felt very real.

It was the same experience as when she was a kid and she'd looked at the dinosaur picture books that boys had been so fascinated with.

She doubted there was any value in things that were long since ruined.

"Huh? Where did the transfer students go?!"

"Yumi. That's a scary look in your eyes. What happened?"

"I mean, like! They're hot! I'll say it one more time... They're hot!!"

It was lunch break. Mei lazily finished her lunch and was looking at her tablet when she heard the voice of someone who could barely contain their excitement.

When she happened to look in the direction it came from, a pair of her classmates dressed in the gal style of fashion were getting riled up.

"The black-and-white-haired...Reiji, was it? He definitely is. But the blond one isn't cute, is he?"

"You don't get it. He's cute. I just know he's got a six-pack; I can already see it."

"That's just your kink... Well, whatever, the two of them are Beastpeople, right?"

The word *Beastpeople* being included in that casual conversation made Mei twitch.

"You get those sometimes, huh. The descendants of, like, monsters from a long time ago? Stuff like that."

"Monsters? There's no such thing."

"No, for real. Though there's hardly any left now, but werewolves and stuff? Things like that. These days, they can't transform or whatever anymore, but it's,

like, in their DNA?”

“You’re being so vague.”

“I’m just not interested in that stuff. Earlier, the politics and econ teacher was talking about it, saying that legally they’re the same as cats and dogs.”

“Huh, you mean animals? Even though he’s a cutie...? Can I keep him as a pet? That cute guy?!”

“I’m shocked that’s the conclusion you came to.”

Though Mei was fed up with this conversation that seemed like it would make her stupider just by listening to it...

Special Permanent Beast, huh.

The personal information displayed on that flip phone’s screen had been shown to the whole class as soon as the two new guys transferred in.

The same class as her, of all things. Rather than being startled by this like in a manga, Mei felt creeped out.

Is it really a coincidence...? It feels like it’s possible it’s not.

Perhaps it could be called animal instinct.

It hadn’t helped at all when she’d been in the accident, so she wouldn’t count on it, but even so, she’d felt something mysterious from that strange handsome boy, Reiji Kasumi, and the other guy who transferred in at the same time.

“Normal Beastpeople are, like, the things you turn into when you take the ‘miracle drug’ out in town.”

“Ah, that. That’s interesting, huh, like becoming a bunny or a dog or a cat.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that. It’s temporary, and once it wears off, you go back to normal, right?”

“I mean, it’d be inconvenient if you didn’t change back. You’d stand out like crazy.”

“The ones that don’t change back are those Special Permanent Beastpeople, the Specials. There are apparently some of them around.”

“Huh. But aren’t those normal people?”

“Don’t ask me; I dunno. But there are people like that.”

“Hmm, well, discrimination is bad. And being hot is what matters, right?”

“That’s true.”

As her classmates’ inane conversation went on, she let it go in one ear and out the other.

“They’re fundamentally treated like animals, but they pay taxes? And they can go to school? Apparently.”

“Hmm. So that’s why those two transferred in. Ah, but—like, I think they do have a school in *that* town.”

“The town is, like, a place for the Specials who were made when people had sex while high. They have no parents, so they’re super out of control. It’s best to stay away; they’re like gangs.”

“Huh, is that right? You know a lot about it.”

“Just rumors. I don’t know if it’s true. I’ve never been to that town, after all.”

“Huh? It’s fun and exciting... Wanna go sometime? I’ll treat you to the miracle drug,” she said, inviting her friend by hunching over a bit to whisper in her ear. She apparently meant to be discreet, but Mei heard everything.

“Aw, no. The transformation is random, right? If I became a pig or something, I’d be embarrassed forever.”

“About that, I recently heard that it depends on the person.”

“What d’you mean?”

“It’s like, you know? Even if they take the same miracle drug, there are people who tend to become dogs, people who tend to become cats, and people who wind up okapis, and it’s not just random, apparently? It’s, like, a rule.”

“I don’t wanna be an okapi...”

“Huh, okapis are cute, though? They’re all stripey.”

“I don’t care, and I can’t imagine what it’s like. Now I wanna try it even less.”

“Ah, but the rumors say that there’s some special stuff aside from those...”

Suddenly, their voices lowered, and Mei didn’t hear the rest.

It was a bit of a disappointment, but Mei didn’t show that. Leaning her chin on her hand, elbow on the desk, she looked at the sky.

“Not like I care, but, like...”

Just a few moments into lunch break, the suspicious transfer students left the classroom.

Beastpeople—the strange guys were called that.

“I hope they leave me alone.”

It would be a bit of a pain if they stuck their noses in her business, like Reiji had that morning.

She had places to go and things to do after school. She didn’t want them getting in her way.

Whatever happened to this useless body of hers in the end...

...It would all come down to tonight.

*

On the same day—and at the same time Mei Mezuki was worrying about things.

On a bench on the school’s roof.

“Everyone’s talking about us, Reiji. We’re famous, huh?”

“I don’t care. Just eat your food.”

Two boys sat with the cold wind blowing around them, side by side on a bench for chow time.

One of them was a frank boy with 70 percent black and 30 percent white hair: Reiji Kasumi.

He was about 172 centimeters tall. The combination of his long and slender legs, small face, and the boyish good looks of his growth spurt also gave him a somehow mature, intelligent air.

“You been cutting corners on your box lunch today? It’s all brown stuff; put in some veggies,” said his friend.

A plain plastic container.

Rice with fish flakes on top. Cabbage boiled to a mush. Discounted sausage.

And that was all—there were two completely identical lunch boxes of crude boy-food, the only highlight being large portion sizes.

“Vegetables are expensive. At least it’s got cabbage,” said Reiji.

“Yeah, boiled to a pulp; are you an old man? Eat it raw, at least! Couldn’t you make it a salad?!”

“It was a sale item that was going bad; eating it raw would make you sick. I was being considerate.”

“For real? This is rough... So sad...”

The other was a boy—no, a young man—wearing a loose T-shirt underneath his uniform.

He was just a little taller than Reiji, but his arms and neck, visible in his uniform, were thicker. Bundles of muscle like tight but hefty rope were condensed in his young and burly frame.

His hair was dyed blond, but it was darker, probably because it hadn’t been colored in a while. He brought the food from this sloppy and apparently homemade box lunch to his mouth like it was particularly gross.

“If people saw two guys eating these stupid matching sloppy lunches on the first day we transferred in, I’d die,” he said, though his chopsticks didn’t stop moving.

“Go ahead and die. What’s the problem?” Reiji slurped on the tea in his canteen as he glared at the other boy.

“Isn’t it embarrassing?! You’re always like that—you’re not worried about how people view you?!”

“There’s no point in trying to show off. If you don’t like splitting the cost of lunches, then eat whatever you like. With your own money.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but... Agh, I wanna eat meat. I wanna eat as much as I can take, something real juicy.”

“If work goes well, we’ll get paid. It’ll get a bit better.”

“For real? I can have meat?”

“Mayonnaise on the cabbage. No, maybe...some canned tuna, at least?”

“That’s not much! But I’m a little motivated now! I hate being poor!” His cry of mixed joy and complaints was loud, absorbed in vain into the sky.

On his social media account, the profile displayed on his personal authentication screen read:

Citizen registration number [redacted] Kyoto Akanebara Municipal High School, class 2-A

Getsu Raisan, achievement and penalty record: [redacted]

Special mention—Special Permanent Beast: werewolf.

The same data had been displayed when he and Reiji had greeted their new class earlier, when they’d weirded everyone out.

His face was not at all ugly. Getsu did come off as macho, but his cheer and friendliness stood out more, and he was the type who seemed like he could naturally make friends. But that wouldn’t happen now that that information had been put on display.

“So I tried casually talking to some people here and there.”

“No one called the cops?”

“You’re so mean! Ah well, that did almost happen...”

During the small gap between classes, before lunch break, Getsu had tried talking to some people, mostly male classmates, but the results had been miserable.

“So they almost did?”

“They don’t have to freak out that hard, y’know? I’m not gonna bite ’em.”

“Officially, we’re treated like animals. We’re collared, but it’s not visible, so

some people are going to be scared.”

“You’re so coolheaded about it. You must want them, too, right? Like a girlfriend and friends, the normal stuff.”

Hearing that, Reiji stopped scooping up the final cold grains of rice and answered, “I do need those. I should work on socializing and building relationships.”

“It’d be nice to have normal friends. If I make some friends, I wanna play video games with them. If I’m always playing with you, it’s never quite a challenge—like, I get bored.”

“You can just play online.”

“The connection at our place is bad. And I don’t have the spare data on my device.”

“For me, I think I’d go shopping somewhere, buy clothes and watch a movie, eat sweets and take selfies, and go to karaoke.”

“Isn’t that pretty girly?”

“Yes. But I’m not talking about me personally. I mean that’s the role I have to fulfill.”

Getting his chopsticks moving again, he carried the final grains of rice to his mouth.

After devouring his lunch with an expression like he was eating sand, Reiji wrapped the box in its cloth and once again looked up at the slightly chilly sky as he changed the subject.

“—So? Did you do your job?”

“While you were busy being late, I did actually get it done. I sniffed the stuff in her shoebox.” Lightly jabbing a finger at his own nose, Getsu said casually but with confidence, “It’s a hit. To use it for a trial, you need a test or analysis for trace elements, but we might not be able to get a sample.”

“So they were washed, huh. Well, of course they would be.”

“It seems like she put in a fair bit of effort to try to hide it. The wet socks

smelled like a urinal cake—shit, piss and blood. She stuck her feet in a toilet bowl or someplace to wash them, then put on her socks and shoes.”

A girl thrusting her bare feet into a toilet.

Splashing them to wash off the blood.

“So she stuck her feet in the toilet to wash them—the hit-and-run centaur,” Getsu said, imagining such a spectacle.

Reiji nodded.

“The only place with water you could use while covered in blood in that town would be public washrooms.”

“With four legs, you can’t even get into a love hotel, huh. How about one of the automated ones with no clerk?”

“Based on the witness sighting and the footprints at the scene, plus the traces on the body retrieved, she’s over ten feet tall and weighs a ton.”

“She’d crush the bed. Being a Mythic Beast that sticks out like crazy, she’ll get found out no matter where she hides.”

Beastpeople like them had no right to investigate or arrest like the regular police.

They couldn’t use the so-called blessings of technology—images from street cameras and movement logs or confirmation of whereabouts from public transportation agencies.

Therefore, they would target their prey and track them down based on the information they’d had drummed into their heads and the facts they gathered as they walked the streets.

“I recall that similar incidents have happened twice before.”

“Yeah. There were witnesses, and people were talking about it. Maybe she let her guard down since it was a back alley?”

The security cameras installed on every street corner, the Eyes of God, were not in *that town* where the crime occurred.

So it had to be because she’d been reckless, since the crime wouldn’t be

recorded.

Thinking back on that series of events, Getsu scratched his cheek.

“If you get seen, it doesn’t matter if you’re on the backstreets or the main drag.”

“There are more people on the backstreets than you think. Vagrants buried in garbage and gangsters and such.”

These two young men were dogs deployed by a certain organization, sent to acquire the testimony of those who had witnessed the culprit—the hit-and-run centaur.

“According to the witness testimony from the first and second incidents, after the hit-and-run centaur left, a suspicious person was seen. She hid in the backstreets until the drug wore off, and after returning to human form, she went back to the station and took the train.”

“...Well, she must have been pretty high.”

The miracle drug that turned people into animals was also a powerful stimulant. It would make people high and cause a decline in reason.

If one let it overwhelm them, then it would dull their ability to think logically...

“If someone saw something that stood out so much as a high school girl with bloody socks, then people would talk.”

“There was nobody like that on the security cameras in the station,” Reiji said.

“For real? How did you look that up?”

“I sneaked into the department in charge of station security and checked myself.”

Even if things were more automated, the job of supervising AI was ultimately left to humans.

So the old-fashioned security offices still existed, and if you could infiltrate one, then you could get as much info as you wanted.

“That’s convenient. Nobody would know you use a technique like *that* to sneak in.”

“Actually, it’s more of a hassle than you think. Sometimes it’s a burden on my back and shoulders.”

“Sometimes you talk like an old man, dude.”

They summarized.

“The culprit went into town in human form, took the miracle drug in the lawless area, and turned into a Mythic Beast. And then she ran around all night, kicking a few drunks to death, and by morning, the drug wore off...,” said Reiji.

“About to return home, she panicked about her bloody socks,” Getsu picked up where he left off. “She washed them in the toilet and went home, and then went to school... This is, like, kind of random and unplanned. She was pretty careless about it.”

“She’s started to get a little worried about others seeing. But...I doubt she thinks she’s being tracked.”

If it ended here, then the dogs’ job would be over.

Based on their investigation, they knew there had been three sprees and eleven bodies discovered.

Not eleven people—eleven “bodies.”

“She took the miracle drug and left the station, and once she was in town where there were no security cameras, she was scot-free... If a Beastperson dies, it’s basically just considered property damage. They’re treated like animals and the police won’t do anything. Their identities aren’t even known in the first place.”

Those were the rules of *that town*—and the price for complete freedom and release.

“With no identity and no one to claim them, it’s the same as hitting a stray dog with your car. Is that a pointless death or what?” Reiji said self-deprecatingly, and Getsu’s expression was similarly bitter.

“Think it’ll happen again tonight?”

“Of course.”

The town where tragedy was inevitable...

The Kyoto Masquerade, Natsukibara.

— 02 Masquerade —

Night was falling.

The city railway routes were laid out like the roots of a tree. In recent years, a loop line had been installed and the stations along this line were equipped with a certain system that hadn't existed before.

"...Haah, haah, haah, haah...!"

A man passed through the ticket gates. The fee was automatically deducted from his device via contactless payment.

The Eyes of God installed in the ticket gates analyzed his body temperature, heart rate, and other indicators. If there were any signs that someone was sick, the doors would not open and he would have to leave in vain.

"This is so suffocating it's obnoxious... Ah, hurry, hurry up...!" Behind the mask pasted on half his face, he clicked his tongue.

Breathing hard, and with his suit in disarray, the white collar-looking, very ordinary middle-aged man left the platform, then touched his phone to the capsule-shaped locker room, renting a private room for the shortest increment of ten minutes.

"It's so stuffy! Shit! My breath stinks, and it's annoying! Haaaaaghhhhhh...!"

Removing the mask, he slammed it into the garbage bin.

The office worker took a deep breath of fresh air, and then gleefully stripped off his clothes.

He folded his suit, tucking it and his phone away into a bag with a change of clothes inside. Then he withdrew the cash he needed from an ATM, putting it in a wallet that he never used outside of this town.

Now in his underwear, the man flipped through the paper bills he had withdrawn.

"Got money. And a change of clothes...! Time to have fun, god dammit! It's

the weekend!”

In a private, soundproof room, freed from the chains of reserve and consideration for others that were normally forced on him...

He cried out with a sense of liberation and took one small bill from his wallet.

He inserted it into the vending machine next to the ATM.

He hesitantly stroked the window that displayed samples of cans in garish colors.

“What’ll I go for today...? Gotta be red!”

The canned drink had a retro design from the energy drinks of bygone times. It was what everyone called the miracle drug.

It was the one key to freedom allowed in this highly regulated society—Monster Tonic.

There were three types.

Red. With a logo of meat on a bone, the flavor was Carnivore.

Green. Its robust cabbage logo indicated Herbivore flavor.

Purple. A logo of sharp claws and a frog’s webbed toes. The flavor was Reptiles and Amphibians.

The classifications could only be described as crude.

They all tasted the same, with the chemical sweetness of lots of added sugar and artificial flavoring.

Look forward to seeing what you’ll become. A once-per-week, weekend pleasure, the Beastperson gacha.

...Pshht!

He held his hand over the order panel. The contactless sensor operated, a Carnivore-flavored red can emerged, and the man gleefully pulled the tab, ready to down the fizzy drink in one go.

“Hnnnnnnnn! Pwahhhhhhhhhh!”

He brought his mouth to the bubbles of the carbonated drink and chugged it.

The volume of the small can was 160 ml. There were also larger cans, but that didn't change the effects.

There had been rumors going around for a while that if they drank a lot, they could transform into something special, and some people had been drinking liters of it, but the most that occurred was a caffeine overdose.

...Crshh!

He crushed the bioplastic container and tossed it into the garbage bin.

“Waaaaaaaugh...! Here it comes, here it cooooooooooooooooooomes...!!” the man in his underwear yelled and trembled.

The inside of his sweat-stained undershirt instantly swelled up, and a striped coat of white-and-brown fur covered his whole body. His mouth extended, his ears stretched out, and his skeleton cracked as it transformed.

“Hyaaaaa-haaaaaaa!! Time to party!!” he cried out, filled with a feeling of release.

Seventy percent beast and 30 percent human—the hybrid of human and the striped hyena that lived all over the African and the Eurasian continents.

The wild creature could even be seen as charming, with blank, droopy eyes, but the man's expression of desire was terribly ugly, and he leaped out of the booth, riled up thanks to the high the powerful drug stimulated.

The lockers were fully automated, so the moment he tossed his things into it, the payment was complete.

His things would be put in the station's temporary storage, with the fee deducted via a payment processor linked to the credit information associated with the phone in his bag. Of course, when taking his bags back, no procedure was needed; it would open with facial recognition.

His personal information was registered in his phone, and his face and fingerprints would distinguish him from others. The convenience of a society that completely controlled information—if one just accepted it for what it was.

“Now then, what'll I do tonight? Oh, girlie! Let's have fun!” he called out to a passing cat girl as he walked through the station toward the exit.

“Huh? How much you offering, mister?”

Her jean shorts were cut sharply upward, like a swimsuit. Though her chest was covered with a tube top, her skin was also hidden by a glamorous short-haired fur coat that made her outfit even more suggestive.

Women who were typically forced to wear worker-assigned uniforms could enjoy wearing whatever they pleased in the Masquerade, anything from goth-loli to punk and more; men and women alike walked through the town in nonsensical attire.

Brilliant neon. Corruption of public morals be damned. Take one step out of the station, and there were crowds that could only be described as obscene, the streets lined with stores selling various products and services with every restriction removed.

“We have pig head, pig heads; they’re delicious! Freshly roasted!”

“Mister, we’ve got some nice girls; wanna get high? Raw sex is okay!”

“Cheeeers! Drink, drink, driiink! Say what you want here!”

A literal pig-man cook was frying a pig head Chinese style, slicing it as it dripped juices.

A lizard-headed pimp called out to men in the street, holding up a lascivious sign.

At a bar that stuck way out into the road, Beastmen in disheveled suits who looked like white-collar workers were taking their drinks from a metal basin that was filled to the brim with no consideration at all for hygiene.

By overwriting their physical characteristics and cutting themselves off from any sort of official tracking, these people transformed into animals.

The miracle drug had no side effects, no discomfort, just instant and casual transformation.

This was the special district where the drug that could turn you into someone completely different—Monster Tonic—was legal.

The pandemic and societal confusion of the early twenty-first century, thought to be a game changer in human history, had intensified the populace’s

sense that they were in danger, and they had clamored for radical solutions—for a world without worries of the virus and for a clean environment!

Pressured by those hysterical cries, an ultra-controlled society had been created. But the voices denouncing the government for taking such drastic measures—and the financial world for running amok—were loud, and the people had continued to seek a meager sense of freedom from within their oppression.

And that answer had come from the same corporate giant that had primarily contributed to the suppression of the pandemic.

The special district bill had been created through the achievements and authority of Beast Tech.

People who took the miracle drug would gain inhuman physiology and metabolism.

In other words, the risk of being infected with most viruses and infectious diseases was minimal, theoretically about zero.

Furthermore, while the supplement was in effect, it would promote abnormal amounts of cell division and self-rehabilitation in the body, and minor wounds would be healed in minutes. Even serious injuries like broken bones would, if treated appropriately, repair completely in a few hours.

It was truly a miracle.

Under the pretense that it was a countermeasure against infectious disease and a system for wartime, the drug had broken through all restrictions. What with the change to mandatory social media and monopoly of public personal authentication, as well as the regulation of speech, assembly, parties, and the sex industry, everything became subjects for credit score subtractions.

This was the exception to what had been effectively made forbidden in a heavily regulated society. This was the town where all freedoms were promised.

The Beastperson special district—Masquerade, Natsukibara.

*

Two boys were standing in a back alley of the business district that was just a

short distance away from Natsukibara station.

The sun had set, and the moon was high in the sky. Getsu Raisan was looking at that hazy, smog-concealed moon as if entranced.

Beside him was the black-and-white-haired boy, Reiji Kasumi. Unlike everyone else in this special Beastperson district, the two of them were not beasts and maintained human form as they fiddled with their flip phones, bored.

“...Not yet?” Reiji asked.

“A little more. Just a little more. Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes... here it comes...ohhhhh...!!” Getsu shivered, his hair standing on end.

Fangs grew, his sideburns extended down his cheeks, and thick fur sprouted under his uniform.

Muscle and bone swelled up thick and round. He had sharp eyes and gray fur, with his bleach-blond highlights remaining there as if leaving behind a trace of humanity on his head.

“Awoooooooooooooo...!”

Half human, half wolf.

A werewolf.

The monster that had been called such in ancient times, the product of long-since-obsolete fiction, was panting just like a real wolf, its giant, bulky body about twice as large as before.

“Sorry for the wait. I’m good now.”

“That part’s fine, but...”

There was a *fssssssss* sound, like something spraying.

Beside the boy who had turned into a werewolf was Reiji Kasumi, and next to him was something else. It came from his mask-covered mouth.

The black mask covered half his face. White mist was spurting from the gaps, swirling about in thick ropes like a snake.

It behaved like a humidifier in winter, but also like a living thing. The white mist seeping out the cracks of his mask traveled from his mouth to his chin and

neck, wrapping around like a scarf to hide his face.

“You’re always so loud about it. Don’t howl.” Reiji glared at him with irritation.

Getsu scratched his fur as he grumbled back, “Sorry, sorry. I just get excited; it’s, like, my nature?”

“It would be embarrassing if people thought I was a dog owner who couldn’t train my pet not to bark. Suck it up.”

“You’re casually treating me like a pet?! But you’re the one who seems like you’d get kept by some weird older lady!”

“I’ve had other people say that about me—what the heck do you guys think I am?!”

The werewolf and mist-shrouded boy glared at one another tensely for a while in the dark alley.

“...Arguing is a waste of time,” Reiji said finally. “I’ll give you a bone gummy, so keep it down next time.”

“Awright, we got a deal... That’s good stuff.”

Reiji had unwrapped a bone chew for pets and handed it to Getsu, who popped it into his mouth and started walking.

“Are those good?”

“They’re not much when I’m human. But when I’m like this, my tastes turn in that direction, too.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, really. Human food tastes good, too, but I feel like I can truly understand this flavor, I guess?”

“That’s pretty vague... Hey, what was your favorite food, again?”

“Chicken tenders and broccoli! The boiled ones.”

“...You really are a dog.”

“What was that?!”

While having this trivial exchange, they walked down the alley.

The red convenience store lights were lit in the lawless town, but the windows had reinforced glass, and the building had thick iron grating over the whole wall. As if drawn toward the brilliance, Beastpeople with rough-looking coats were sprawled out lying on top of each other.

They had newspapers and cardboard boxes instead of blankets. With the stench of rotten box lunches, vomit, and alcohol wafting around, Getsu made his way along, avoiding stepping on those carelessly sleeping lumps as he complained in exasperation, "There are more guys not leaving."

"The guys who don't get enough just coming occasionally are now living on the streets here, huh?"

Only a limited few were permitted residence in the Masquerade.

Anyone else had no choice but to either settle down in the ruins of the lawless district or make the street their bed.

There were plenty of such squatters found anywhere in the Masquerade.

"Just what's so great about it?" Getsu grumbled. "It's cleaner outside, the food's better, it doesn't stink, and it's quiet."

"Ask them that, and they generally answer 'There's no freedom.'"

"Well, there's plenty of that here. But..."

"Only for the people who can protect themselves."

At the convenience store entrance...

Over a piece of a hot snack, the petty amount of meat left on a skewer...

"It's mine!! Let go, you bastard!"

"I'm the one who found it! *Geh, gah...?! God dammit, die!*"

Two stray dog men, skinny like people who lived on the streets, were tangled up, biting at each other and swinging punches.

The gathered vagrants didn't stop them, just watched like they were bored.

...Crack!

One guy got a good hit on the other's jaw, and the stray dog man staggered and fell, only to be covered by trash.

Instantly, the nearby squatters swarmed him, thrusting their hands in his pockets.

"Tsk, he's broke. He doesn't even have change."

"...I've gotta buy my next miracle drug before mine runs out. Hey, money, money, gimme money!"

"*Geh! Gah!* S-stop...stop it, you guys!"

"What can you do? Guess I'll just take your raggedy clothes. Strip!"

"Yeeep!"

The two boys watched as the swarm tried to strip the fallen dog man not only of his change, but the clothes on his back.

"...Maaaan, they're hopeless, damn."

"It's a common enough sight. Let's go."

Disgusted, Getsu and Reiji quickly left.

They went through the back alley, to a corner near the main road.

The places where squatters stayed in ruins were more orderly, compared to the alleys.

The roofs made of scrap wood on battered old buildings had signs up, and the air was filled with the smell of moonshine or the smoke of mystery meat frying, of alcohol and tobacco. It was just like the bustling black markets of long ago.

"It stinks..."

"I have no desire to join that."

Getsu pinched his nose, and Reiji looked revolted. They made their way down the lines of bars on the back road.

On the way there, the Beastpeople going to and fro through the trash-ridden town glared at Reiji.

"You really do stand out, looking mostly human," said Getsu.

“I’m hiding my face, so it’s fine. I’m going with the dress code.”

Pretty much all the rude stares were focused on Reiji.

Even if he had half his face covered in that strange mist, without a fur coat or scales, he was clearly human.

In this town, where getting high on Monster Tonic was basically an unwritten rule, Reiji stood out. Many Beastpeople were giving him suspicious looks, but Reiji ignored them like he didn’t care.

“Uh, that’s not the problem. Learn to fit in; come on.”

“That’s the one part of the value system in this country I can’t stand,” he said, mist scarf wavering and wafting as he deliberately exposed his lips, frowning in displeasure.

Getsu let out an aggrieved sigh that flattened his fluffy fur. “I get that... But you’re a difficult person, Reiji.”

“Are you one to talk?” Reiji shot back bluntly.

Getsu cracked a smile. “Maybe not. But—like, it sounds like a joke. The guy who’s literally blending into the air can’t read the air around him. Isn’t it funny?”

“Shut up... Hmm?” Reiji cut off their joking and looked ahead.

The bar district was crowded with miscellaneous Beastpeople. There was a stirring in the throng of a familiar-sounding voice.

“I said you’re in my way, old man! You’re sticking out into the street, and I can’t get by!”

“Huh...? Hey, the hell are you—? This kid isn’t on the drug...!”

“And you brought a phone? Bringing that in with the power on... Stop it, stop it; don’t take photos!”

A street stand for cheap liquor blocked the narrow lane with its business.

Some laborer Beastpeople were surrounding a big iron grill where skewered mystery organs were cooking. They must have been making their living by taking contracts for planning work or physical labor in the special district.

The rough men—a group circling a rhinoceros man with horns on his face and a four-horned warthog man—were basically monopolizing the lane to sit in a circle and drink, when right in the middle of them...

There came a completely manual wheelchair with no movement assistance, rarely seen these days—along with its owner.

“For real?!” Getsu cried. “That’s the girl from our class, isn’t it? The one with a sort of confusing name!”

“...I’m going to go help her. Cover for me.”

“Reiji?! Agh, man... There’s no stopping you, huh?”

The black-and-white-haired boy nimbly leaped into the bickering crowd.

The ears of Beastpeople could be round, square, or triangular, with a far greater variation compared to the rounded ears of humans.

As he skimmed along the ends of those ears, gliding like a weightless thread or smoke, she came into view.

So it was the girl from this morning.

Hadn’t she said her name was Mei? Beastpeople were picking a fight with that crass girl in the wheelchair.

Judging by her club tracksuit, it seemed she’d gotten changed before coming. The Akanebara High Track and Field Club uniform had a built-in mask, and it made him want to say, *Don’t come to this lawless district with your personal info completely exposed*, but he didn’t have the time for that now.

And then there were the drunks.

They must have had plenty to drink. Tottering on his feet, the rhinoceros man raised up an arm like a log as he approached to knock the phone from her hand and, while he was at it, grab her from her wheelchair.

Splat!

The girl was flung out onto the puke-spattered ground of the back alley.

You might think that getting smeared in muck would make her give up, but she gave him a terrific glare in return and yelled something.

Reiji couldn't tell what, but it must have been pretty nasty, because in response the rhino man bared his teeth, and his warthog buddy crushed the phone on the ground under his hoof.

Just as he witnessed that...

"What are you doing in a place like this?" Reiji asked her.

"Huh...? Yeek?!"

Soundlessly drifting down, he fell between the rather agitated rhinoceros and warthog Beastmen and Mei.

Wrapping his arms around her distinctly muscled abdomen, he picked up the girl, who was fairly heavy for her height.

"Wh-wh-wha...?! What're you doing?!" she cried.

"Shut up; you'll bite your tongue," Reiji shot back. "...That's such a classic line. I'm kinda glad I got to say it."

"Where did you pop out from? Nooo! What the heck? Yikes! Huh—?!" Mei's confused cries cut off in shock.

A girl alone. A toned athlete. Her body fat percentage was incredibly low. But even so, this slender boy easily picked up her few dozen kilos of mass, then raced with certainty through the crowds.

No way. His balance...is amazing!

To Mei, who had run more than anyone, this was difficult to understand.

You could make up for weight with muscle. But achieving perfect balance was impossible. He was so graceful he could carry a person underneath his arm without losing balance himself—and also while navigating through a crowded bar district.

He moved with abnormal agility—flowing like smoke within the tightly packed crowds, occasionally breaking through almost too quickly, bringing her along even as she couldn't understand just what was going on.

"H-hey, don't run away, you little brat!!" said the rhinoceros man.

"H-he's fast... I can't even see them anymore. Ah, hey, you! The hell are you

doing?!” shouted the warthog man, dumbfounded.

And then there was an unfamiliar voice.

“Heh-heh, sorry. See ya!”

“Showing your real face isn’t allowed in this town,” Reiji scolded her. “Neither are phones. Worst case, you would have been killed.”

“I was just using a map! I was lost; this town is a total mess!!”

“Ever since it was made a special district, it takes them years to update the map app. It’s your fault for relying on that.”

“Is there no such thing as common sense in this garbage dump?!” Perhaps out of fear, the girl’s cries made her sound high.

Then a few of the Beastpeople passing by went “Ehh?” on finding the source of that voice—an out-of-place human.

“What, there’s a human here? It’s a kid, a girl.”

“Tsk. She must be here to take those stupid videos. It’s not a show, bitch!”

In response to the spat whispers and looks of contempt, she said, “Huh? What’s with these people?”

“There are a lot of idiots who do live broadcasts or want to film Beastpeople out of curiosity.”

It was common enough for that sort of streamer or journalist to come peek at the deeper parts of town.

Generally, their things would be destroyed on the spot, and the unwelcome guests would be disposed of without their bodies ever being discovered.

“This area is still close to the main road. Amateurs come a lot. It’s dangerous, so leave now,” Reiji said.

“I didn’t come to this dumpster full of morons because I wanted to!!” Mei gritted her teeth; rather than settling down, she was getting even more fired up.

“Hey... What’s with you guys? Yelling your asses off while we’re trying to enjoy our drinks. Shut it!”

“Do you wanna die...? I’ll grant your wish!”

A few Beastpeople, some gangsters smelling of liquor, blocked their way.

In their hands were knives and broken bottles. When they went back to the station before dawn, got the miracle drug out of their system, returned to human form and changed clothes, they would put on their masks and resume their lives as normal citizens. But right now, there were no rules to bind them.

For these literal beasts, there was no reason to restrain their violent impulses.

“Shut up; this is none of your business!” Mei shot back. “You want to drink and party so badly you’d give up being human, you old farts?!”

Reiji could feel her trembling.

Excessive aggression—the other side of fear. A reflexive response to trauma.

Once Reiji registered that, another bomb dropped.

“Just how lonely are you, feeling sad and alone at your age?! Go home and drink with your family!!” she railed at them.

“What...?!”

“Hey...!”

Pouring oil on a fire, tossing a bomb on a powder keg. Her scathing criticism sent the Beastpeople into a frenzy.

“I saw that kid before. She’s been going around this area in a wheelchair. She had a phone then, too.”

“She doesn’t have it now. So there’s no one watching? Then...we don’t have to hold back, huh?”

“Yeah, we could knock her out or kill her outright. Wheelchairs just get in the goddamn way!”

Part of it had to be because they were drunk.

With the bodies of animals and the shockingly ugly expressions of humans, the Beastpeople blocked any escape routes.

“Taking advantage and doing whatever she wants just ’cause she’s in a

wheelchair... When we're working our asses off, she gets a pension just 'cause her legs don't work—and gets to live the easy life!"

"Right? And then she's like, *Oh, poor me! Help me!* huh?"

"The hell do you think you are, you stupid girl? We've gotta make you understand, huh, that the defective ones get to die!"

As the drunk men—at this point, basically a mob—approached with weapons raised...

"Thanks for saving me. You can let me go now," Mei said, under his arm.

Reiji frowned.

"You'll die."

"I can't get you dragged into this, too," she said to Reiji, then continued shouting at the mob. "It's fine; come at me. What are you gonna do, punch me? Kick me? Or is it rape, huh? Just you try sticking it in, and I'll bite it off before you can manage!!"

"Th-the fuck...?!"

Her powerfully nasty mouth made the drunks flinch. This was beyond just being strong-willed.

It was something of a rare trait unique to an athlete—an incredible competitive spirit and the ability to fight back—and an odd nobility.

It was true she'd brought it on herself. He had no obligation or duty to save her, but...

"...So I should have covered your mouth, too," Reiji muttered, facepalming with the hand that wasn't carrying Mei.

But.

For just a moment there, he wondered to himself.

You would tell me to save her, wouldn't you, Ikka?

The faces of his lost family members rose in his mind for just an instant.

"Die, bitch!"

As the Beastpeople attacked, their raging violence before him, he did not back down.

“Hurry; let me go! Or you’ll...!”

“Shut up, stupid.”

The moment she was rebuked, Mei felt a distinct weightlessness.

Reiji bent his knees and jumped nimbly into the air.

The two of them ascended high into the night sky in a loose arc that seemed to defy gravity.

“Huh...?!”

Dumfounded, the mob looked up at the pair of them floating in the air.

“Whoa...!” Mei cried out in astonishment.

The filthy, deplorable, garbage dump-like bar district. The shanties that propagated like cancer cells. The streets resembling clogged arteries, hardly ever cleaned.

But if one left the ground and looked at it from above, the chaotic lights shining in the night sky were as beautiful as the Milky Way.

They landed on top of one of the shanty street stalls. Leaping and then floating through the air again and again, Reiji jumped to the window frame of a decades-old building, relying on the smallest footholds like air conditioner units and power lines to hop along.

“You can fly?!” Mei cried.

“I can’t fly. I’m just *light*.”

With that incomprehensible reply, the two of them landed gently.



They were on the roof of a ruined building that was far away from the scene where they had just gotten into an argument. The mob could no longer reach them, having lost track of the pair that leaped away leaving only a mist-like trail, now buried in the faraway crowds.

“Don’t start cursing at me when I know you’re scared. You’re like a bomb.”

“I-I’m not scared! I’m trembling with excitement!!”

“You didn’t get that expression quite right.”

With a chuckle, he bounded to the top of a nearby building and perched on a tilted water tower. Reiji wiped away a bit of the rust and mud and gently lowered Mei down there to sit.

“...Thanks. For saving me twice.” She expressed her gratitude awkwardly—she really must have felt remorseful.

“So you *can* say thank you? I thought you were from some culture that didn’t have that.”

“Where the heck do you think I’m from? If I couldn’t thank you now, then I’d just be a dimwitted jackass.”

“Even if you can, it’s the same thing. You’re a dimwit and a jackass.”

“Huh?! You don’t have to go that far!”

“I don’t have to go that far...? You’re the one who said it.”

“I did, but you saying it is still irritating.”

“What a tyrant.”

But despite stating that, Reiji had figured Mei out.

It seems like she’s mad, but she’s not.

To Mei Mizuki, insults and abuse were fuel to pump herself up.

She was scolding herself more than anyone else. By acting angry, she could get her adrenaline to spike.

She had to excrete excess adrenaline and present herself as angry, or she would surely be trembling in fear. The blood pressure and heart rate he felt

while touching her hand was telling him so.

So why was that?

“You really hassled those drunks,” Reiji pointed out. “You hate alcohol?”

“I hate it so much. If not for that stuff...I’d still be able to run.” Weakly, she slumped where she sat with her legs to one side on the rusted water tower.

The only thing girlish about her was the way she demurely positioned her legs.

“You get it, right?” she said. “That I was, um...freaked out.”

“I got that much.”

The weaker the dog, the louder they barked. In this wild town, that was the obvious logic.

Understanding that he saw through her, Mei suddenly dropped the tough act and held up her trembling hands and smirked with self-deprecation.

“At the end of the year, last winter... Some fool hit me with his car.”

“A traffic accident, huh?”

“Yeah. My back was broken. And as you can see, my right leg is paralyzed, so I can never run again.”

What she had set her life on. It was the loss of her identity.

Just seeing drunks was terrifying, and in order to stand up to what she was afraid of—she’d had to be angry, or she just couldn’t.

That’s why you’re so aggressive. Come on, consider your own safety.

It was pretty difficult for someone who needed lifestyle support to come to this town in the first place.

There were few people in this lawless district who would show consideration for others or help someone else.

To the majority, this was a playground for enjoying alcohol and pleasure.

They didn’t want to be dragged into some trouble and have their good time interrupted, and they would even feel pleasure at stomping on or ignoring the

sort of charitable acts and humanitarian concern they were forced to do outside.

What was forbidden was fun—that was the ugly nature of such people.

“They said the guy who was driving had been getting high in this town just five minutes before he struck me. Most rich people are like that, and they just post bail and get off easy,” she said.

“It would have decreased his credit quite a bit, though.”

“If you ‘deal with it appropriately,’ then apparently that’s not the case. Yeah, he gave me a whole bunch of money... I wanted to tell him, I don’t give a shit about that, just fix my damn bent backbone.”

“These drunks are not that driver.”

“I know. I’m taking it out on other people; I’m awful and pathetic.”

She had to be ashamed of herself.

He picked up on a feeling other than anger in her tightly pressed lips and moist eyes.

“But I can’t help it. When I see people like that, I get so angry it makes me want to kill them. I’ve felt like this since I first stood in front of the track right before the start and saw my rivals.”

“...You did that every competition?”

“I didn’t insult them directly. I just thought in my heart that I’d kill them all.”

“Are you crazy? Or are all athletes like that?”

“Who knows; I don’t know about other people. That was just how I did it.”

What an awkward girl, Reiji thought.

She only knew how to fight. Like the warriors of ancient times. But now that she had lost the way to do that.

All she knew...was how to snap at people.

“Then at least practice closing your eyes and plugging your ears. Picking a fight like that is no different from suicide.”

“...Is it that bad?”

Yeah, Reiji answered with a little nod.

At the end of the day, frankly speaking, she was a dangerous girl. Her mouth, personality, and attitude were about as bad as could be.

But for some reason—he didn’t know why—he wanted to help her.

Oh, I see.

That was what it was.

Even if she was really, incredibly socially inept, he couldn’t bring himself to hate someone who struggled so fiercely to live her life.

Tonight, she was lucky. He had been at the scene of the dispute, and he was able to save her.

He had to make sure she understood that was the reason she hadn’t died.

She’ll get murdered next time if I’m not there... What a hassle, when I have work to do.

Figuring he would regret it if he didn’t do anything and things wound up that way, Reiji spoke harshly.

“It is. This is a lawless district. Even if someone wanders in here and dies, the police won’t properly investigate. Someone who can’t defend themselves shouldn’t come here. You’ll just be killed.” And it wouldn’t be a nice death, either. “There’s a type of incident that has happened many times, ever since the Masquerade was created. They never report on it publicly, but it’s common sense to people who have come here a few times before.”

“...I don’t know of it. What do you mean?”

“Consumption incidents—because of the three types of Monster Tonic, the most popular is Carnivore. If you’re just staying a single night, that’s one thing, but if you stay for a long time and make it a habit—you’ll be broken.”

Consumption incidents. In other words, that meant...

Giving in to carnivorous instincts—

“You mean...killing and eating someone?! Even if they’re transformed into

weird things, they're still human!"

"Sometimes people lose the good sense that would tell them that. To a carnivore, living prey is pleasure. Just like a cat hunting a mouse, it's all about chasing, killing, and eating." It would become a primitive pleasure far beyond sex. "You're only alive because I happened to be there. It was only some drunks there, but they were still strong enough to turn you into mincemeat, and there was no reason for them not to," he said, looking her right in the eye.

"..." Mei, who had been holding her breath listening, waved her hand like she was fanning herself. "...It's all smoky here. The heck is this? It's like a humidifier."

"Don't tease me." As she fanned away the white smoke of the misty scarf that covered Reiji's face, he continued, telling her not to evade this discussion. "Listen, I can't always be around to save you. I'm busy. I'll take you to the station, so go home right away."

"All right. You're...weirdly earnest. A good guy who cares about other people."

She looked a little exasperated, so Reiji responded with a sour look.

"If you were to die here, we would be the ones cleaning it up. Don't make more work for me," he answered like this was too much trouble for him.

But Mei was surprised and looked up at where he was standing.

"Huh? What's that mean? Are you doing some security job part-time?"

"Something like that. The company I'm with takes cleaning contracts from town management."

"So then isn't this town being covered in garbage your company's fault?"

"There's so much garbage that we can't keep up. We don't have enough people or dump trucks, and the pay is low."

The Masquerade was large. It was part of the eastern capital, where the emperor had once been.

And a great number of people gathered there from all over the country. It wasn't an amount that only one company could manage.

“I’m already busy to begin with; I don’t want to be cleaning up the pieces of my classmate’s body. Go home.”

“...A vampire with a part-time job. Isn’t that funny? Go suck some blood to live.”

“Ah, there it is. I’m not a snake; that’s not gonna happen.” It was a joke that always came up for a Special with V_{AMPIRE} on their ID. “Getting offered tomato juice is the standard line, and people ask me over and over if I’m okay with garlic. I don’t know about other people, but I don’t have any allergies. I eat like anyone else.”

“Oh, of course. Now that you mention it, you have been walking around in the middle of the day.”

“That’s how it is. I’m a human. Though, I have something extra on my family register.”

“...Huh.” It made sense to Mei, thinking that was just how it worked.

When you got down to it, he was kind of an incredible person.

“I’ve met some of those,” she said, “rivals who were like the children of immigrants and had set good times. Not that I care about that stuff.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, of course. No matter where they came from, if they’re strong, they’re strong, and if they’re fast, they’re fast, that’s it. Whoever pisses me off, I’ll just kick their asses equally. There’s no problem with that.”

“Are you a dark lord or what...?”

She had an attitude similar to a battle maniac or an evil demon king one might see in manga.

He did worry just a little whether he should have saved a girl like this, but...

“Could it be you were trying to be considerate?”

“...If that’s what you think it is, then sure.” Mei turned to the side with a *hmph*.

The way she hid her feelings with that gesture brought a smile to his lips.

“Don’t be shy. Oh well. It doesn’t offend me.” She was like an animal that wouldn’t take to people. That was something he knew a lot about. “I have a hamster.”

“Where’s this coming from, all of a sudden?!”

“It was my sister’s, but stuff happened, and I wound up with it. I ask someone else to handle most of its care, but I try to feed it myself as much as I can. But every time, it tries really hard to bite me.”

“Doesn’t it just hate you?”

“Yeah. It’s a lot like you right now.”

“Now you’re pissing me off. What the heck; is that some pretty boy trick for getting girls?”

“I’d say no either way... Well, whatever.” While standing next to the girl who sat on the rusty water tower, the boy looked down at her as the girl looked up at him. “You have a surprisingly sensible side to you, stupid girl.”

“Well, you’re surprisingly normal, vampire.”

“I am normal. I want to be normal. I’m...working on that.”

A sad smile. Though it should have been a completely ordinary wish...

It looked like a line that other people couldn’t easily cross.

“That weird haze around your face and your ability to jump up over buildings... That’s not normal, but you want to be normal, huh?”

“It’s not that complicated.”

Closing his eyes meditatively, the inhuman boy muttered his wish.

“I just want the kind of lifestyle where I can...not buy tickets with cash, but use public transportation via the automatic gates... Listen to music without anyone bothering me in a warm, secure apartment... And occasionally spoil myself with a nice meal at a restaurant.”

His wish, spoken in intermittent bits, was all modest things.

But what if someone hadn’t ever gotten those things, if one couldn’t be given those things?

“I get that you’re living a tough life. Though, I won’t sympathize with you.”

“You won’t? That’s unusual.”

“I have no interest in pity parties. And I’m not going to make your misfortune into misery porn.”

She would never be interested in that—crying out “Oh, poor you!” over someone’s misfortune.

Consuming it, acting like you understand, and doing nothing more.

“I can’t run anymore,” she said. “You can’t become human... We can’t do these things that we should normally be able to do. It’s maddening and frustrating, and I really wish things could be like that, that I could go back.”

“Isn’t that empathy?”

“I do have empathy, though? Sympathy and empathy are different things.”

“How are they different? I don’t really know.”

“Whether you’re going to lean on someone or stay standing on your own. It’s a big difference.”

Her face was dirty with vomit from the ground of the bar district. Her smile was like that of a stray cat in the slums.

I guess that’s how it is, Reiji thought. And then, right at that moment— “Sorry to interrupt your talk. Here, I’m giving this back!”

With a fierce metallic rattling sound, a wheelchair was flung over the roof of the ruined building.

Supple legs like whips notched claws into the uneven spots of the wall, the rotten air conditioner units and cracks and fissures.

The fluffy wolf man with blond highlights, Getsu Raisen, put down Mei’s wheelchair, which had been abandoned in that bar district, and landed on the roof of the ruined building to look up at the two of them on the water tower.

“Are you on a date? This looks like a scene out of an American comic!” Getsu called out teasingly.

“Huh? Who’re you? Someone you know, Reiji?” Mei answered with a

skeptical scowl.

“Yeah, and you know him, too... He was right next to me when he introduced himself in class.”

“Ah...the transfer student. The one who’s not handsome but that one girl liked anyway.”

“Wait, me not being handsome aside, a girl liked me?! For real?! Who?!”

Their conversation got into a tangled mess.

Reiji was fed up, Mei was disinterested, while Getsu was pumped.

“A girl from our class. Seems like she likes macho types.”

“...Awright!! That can happen sometimes; nice! Yes!!”

“You seem really happy about it. You must have had terrible luck with girls... Poor thing,” said Mei.

“It’s ‘cause he’s broke. Poor in many senses of the word.”

“Shut it! Anyway, why don’t you come down now? Isn’t it cold up there?”

“...Yeah, there’s someplace I want to go, so let me down. Please.” Mei bowed her head to make the request.

Getsu broke into a big, wolfish smile.

He was surprisingly expressive—with a face like the cute pets that flooded social media.

With his human expressions, despite being a beast, he looked surprisingly like a person.

“Sure. *Hup!*”

If Reiji was mist or haze, then Getsu was a gracefully bouncing spring.

The werewolf bounded effortlessly off the concrete, landing on the slope of the narrow water tower. He dug his toe claws into the peeling paint, making it a foothold for less than a second before he gently scooped up the girl.

He didn’t even rumple her clothing in the process—a careful and swift escort.

“...You’re a hundred times more comfortable to ride!”

“Right? Thank you very much for your patronage. We await your return... Whoo!”

With a series of acrobatic jumps, Getsu lowered Mei down onto the roof of the ruined building and then smirked.

“What a stink!” Mei cried. “...I could go blind from breathing that in. You smell so much like dog!”

“Huh? For real?! Ah, was it because I just had that bone gummy?! Man, Reijiii!”

“It’s my fault now? And hey, you were like that to begin with. Why do you stink when you brush your teeth?”

“I dunno! I’m just a wolf; that’s how I am! Waaah.”

That unexpected remark was a critical hit. The scary-looking werewolf had tears in his eyes and sniffed dejectedly.

“I think it’s weird when men use a cutesy voice.”

“What a coincidence; so do I,” Reiji agreed. “Quit the cute act, canine.”

“Agh, agh, aaah! What’s with those synchronized insults?! Your guys’ nastiness syncs up so well!”

“Compared to her, I’m normal.”

“I don’t want to get told that by a boy who floats!”

While they insulted each other, Reiji leaped in another arc that ignored gravity and landed softly.

He checked the wheelchair that had been tossed up to the ruined building’s rooftop. Fortunately, there was no obvious damage.

“It seems like there’s nothing wrong with it. You can roll around normally.”

“But well, not having an electric one these days. Is that something you’re hung up on?” Getsu seemed deeply interested.

She huffed at him.

“I just decided to run with my arms now that I can’t do it with my legs.

Something wrong with that?”

The intensity in her eyes as she glared at him—a normal delinquent would feel a pressure that would bring them to tears.

“Naw. Sounds fine to me. It’s constructive,” said Getsu.

“I don’t care,” said Reiji.

Getting abruptly ignored and somehow feeling let down, Mei continued. “I see. By the way, what’s your guys’ relationship? Something sexual?”

“Hell! No! We live together, but we’re just roommates!” Getsu protested.

“Since it means splitting the rent,” Reiji explained. “It’s for economic reasons. We’re also coworkers.”

“Ah, oh, the...cleaning work you mentioned before.” The image of the janitors that occasionally came to the school rose to Mei’s mind.

That would be either an old man in overalls waxing the floors or a technical expert giving instructions to a cleaning drone with a tablet, but clearly, neither of these two boys fit that image.

“Do you mean like picking up garbage in town? That’s a nice job.”

“Though garbage is garbage, it’s a sketchy sort of ‘garbage,’” said Getsu.

According to the existing laws, the users of the miracle drug Monster Tonic were not human, but animals.

Therefore, there were no laws that controlled them. However, if they harmed people, or caused exceptional trouble within the special district, or were involved in destructive activity, then “animal control” was commissioned by public organizations to deal with the problem.

“For a personal reference and the reward of minimal human rights, we’ve been hired by a certain company,” Reiji said—an animal but also a human.

Bestowed with some meager rights, they were allowed to place themselves at the bottom rank of humanity.

“If you consider the risk of police officers dying or being injured, they can’t be wasted on pest extermination in this town,” Getsu continued.

They were the one official self-cleaning activity in this lawless town.

The cleaners dealt with trash that was too dangerous to be left alone.

“Even if the people who have taken the miracle drug are animals, police are completely human,” Getsu went on. “Officers dying would be a big issue, so they couldn’t do their work here unless they were prepared to shut down the whole town. That’s where people like us step in.”

“...The police have guns, though, don’t they?” said Mei. “Can’t they use tranquilizers?”

“Not just any drug will work on a Beastperson who’s really high,” Getsu answered. “And in the first place, legally, you need to have both a veterinary license and a hunter’s license to use a tranquilizer gun. And the amount of drug that works is completely different depending on the weight and type of animal.”

It was too risky to bring in the public security organizations and the police of the outside world.

So they used disposable pawns, fighting fire with fire.

“It’s easier for them to hire us Special Permanent Beasts for cheap,” said Reiji.

Seeing Reiji’s masochistic smile, Mei pouted angrily.

“And you just accept that?”

“Frankly, no...,” said Getsu. “But there’s nowhere else for us to go.”

“It’s work.”

Precisely because they were in a vulnerable social position, they had only one option.

Even if they didn’t like it and didn’t want to do it, they had few other opportunities.

“I don’t like it,” said Mei. “It’s like they’re sacrificing you so some adults can take it easy. Your work is needed, but aren’t you just being used?”

“You get angry about some strangers’ business as if it was your own, huh?”

“Whether it’s me or someone else, seeing someone get a raw deal makes me

angry.”

“...Are you some kind of delinquent? Scary...!”

All three wore different expressions, and the scariest looking of them all, the werewolf, was shying away from the angry girl.

His tail wiggled weakly from side to side. Ignoring that, Mei grabbed onto some nearby rubble to pull herself up, trying to get into the wheelchair on her own.

“Ah, want help?”

“I don’t need it. I can do it myself... *Hnf!*”

With a grunt that had not a shred of girlishness, she flexed the muscles of her upper arms.

“It’s only my right leg that’s completely paralyzed. I can move my left some, so I can manage this much.”

“I see.”

Nonchalantly touching the wheelchair, Mei positioned herself so it would be easy to get on.

While staying ready to support her at any time, Reiji watched over her small struggle.

“It’s true...even if it is out of goodwill, having people trying to help you with everything sounds rough.”

“Yeah, it is. Why would I have someone else do even things I can do myself? Am I a child?”

“No, I get that. But you’re too much of a tough guy... Aren’t you a girl?”

“Gender doesn’t matter. I’m just strong,” she declared, and then flexing her arm muscles, Mei finally got into the wheelchair. “...*Hya! Phew...!* That’s more or less how it goes.”

“You *are* tough,” Reiji said with a bit of exasperation and some respect, seeing the sweat beading on her forehead. “I get it. There’s no point in treating you like a lady.”

“It’s been bothering me for a while now, but you haven’t said my name once. Just call me Mei.”

“Calling you by your given name, out of the blue? You’re okay with that?”

“I hate my surname. It’s hard to say anyway. I’ll call you Getsu and Reiji, too.”

“...I don’t know how to treat you. Normally, that’s what you do when you’re friends.” Reiji tilted his head.

“I don’t mind being friends. We’re classmates, and you helped me with a bunch of stuff.”

“...What...?!”

“For real?!”

That casual remark hit the two Beastmen like a punch.

“H-hey, man...we made a female friend! What do we do?!” Getsu asked Reiji.

“Wait, calm down, don’t panic. The first question is whether you can actually call her a girl.”

“That’s true. She is a tough one, after all. But even that aside, she’s our first friend on the outside ever.”

“True... How do we deal with this? Ngh, there’s no handbook for this...!”

“...You guys are so dumb.”

They probably thought they were talking seriously and earnestly, but watching from the side, the boy and werewolf sticking their heads together to worry about their friendships was nothing other than a gag.

“So then as your friend, I’ve got a little request,” said Mei.

“Here it comes. You need a joint guarantor?” asked Reiji.

“Just so you know, we have no money!” Getsu said. “Well...if it’s just getting you something from the convenience store, then that’s fine?”

“That’s too much. I’ll only allow one canned coffee, max,” stipulated Reiji.

“How stingy. And who’s asking for that anyway? That’s not what I wanna say.” Mei jabbed downward with her thumb and asked, “There’s no elevator here, is

there?”

“It’s a crumbling building. There isn’t even electricity.”

“Right. Then help me get down the stairs. Please.”

Ah, Reiji thought, getting it.

Since the building was from an era when not much thought was put into disability access, there was no way to descend the ruin’s stairs in a wheelchair.

“I don’t mind,” said Reiji. “We’ll escort you to the station, so go home.”

“I can’t,” Mei replied. “There’s something I have to do here.”

“So then what if I say I won’t help you get down?”

“I’ll drop my wheelchair down the stairs and crawl down.”

“You’re not even hesitating...”

It probably wasn’t a lie or a bluff. If she said she would do it, she’d do it.

They hadn’t known each other very long, but Reiji and Getsu could both understand that.

“...What can you do? Let’s bring her down, Getsu.”

“Sure. And like, couldn’t you tell us about your situation? Then we might be able to help you.”

“I can’t do that. This is my problem. It’s something I have to do.”

With that gaze of unwavering determination on them, the two Beastmen nodded simultaneously.

Reiji was in front, and Getsu in the rear. Holding up the wheelchair like a palanquin, they started descending the stairs.

“Thanks.”

Hearing her words of gratitude, they continued down the stairs of the crumbling ruin.

“It’s pitch-black,” Mei said. “...I can’t see anything.”

“We’re fine. Right?” said Getsu.

“If you’re scared, then close your eyes. You can’t see in the dark anyway.”

“Huh? I’m not scared!”

It was a reflexive reaction. But her heart rate was up, her body heat and blood pressure had spiked, and her scent had changed.

The Beastmen picked up on those signs of fear, but they didn’t press her about them, just descended the crumbling stairs toward the darkness of the city. Fortunately, the route was not completely cut off anywhere, and in a few minutes, they reached the ground floor.

When they exited the ruin and saw the faint light of the streetlights, she said, “...I’m relieved. Or rather, I just realized—wouldn’t it have been faster to jump down?”

“We could have, but that would have been really dangerous,” said Reiji. “On the off chance we dropped you, you’d be dead.”

“Safety first. Human life is the number one priority,” Getsu agreed. “Since it’s a lot more expensive than ours.”

“You’re strangely conservative... Well then, I’m going. Good-bye!”

Having reached the street, she left them behind, the wheels of her chair squeaking as she went.

Of course, she was headed in the opposite direction from the station.

She was indeed afraid, terrified even. But something greater than those feelings drove her to prowl the lawless district.

After watching until she was a speck in the distance, the werewolf gave Reiji a look out of the corner of his eye.

“What’ll we do?”

Reiji took a little breath and said, “She’s our friend now. So you get it, right?”

“Yup... Is it about time?”

Checking on his wristwatch, which was buried in fluffy fur, Getsu told him, “The place *that* shows up changes every time. But the timing is about the same.”

“She must not be able to control herself anymore around that time.” Just like someone who became hungry at a certain time of day. “It must be that she can’t be satisfied unless she kills. Is it in this area?”

“Definitely. I made sure to remember her smell,” Getsu answered, sniffing the air with his wet black wolf nose.

“Whoa?!”

From the end of the backstreet that Mei had just vanished down:

An explosion.

“...You didn’t even need to sniff.”

It has to be about two blocks away, Reiji wondered as he turned around.

The black smoke of burning gasoline rose up like a mushroom, and the shock wave hit before the sound.

Glass shattered all around them. Next, there was an earsplitting roar.

“Could you see it, Reiji?”

“Yeah. It was a car. It went flying straight up like a toy and then fell and blew.”

With their inhuman senses, they had seen that right before it exploded.

First, the silhouette of the car that had been sent flying into the night sky like a bouncing Ping-Pong ball. It fell, and then it must have crashed into something combustible, as it caused a dramatic explosion, like a scene in a movie.

The cause was most likely—

“She’s here. The hit-and-run centaur.”

Gazing at the swirl of smoke and flames that rose up in the distance, casting red on their cheeks...

The dogs of order rushed over.

— 03 Mythic Beast —

A few minutes before the two boys witnessed the explosion. On Kamimachi street, the street name meaning “waiting for gods,” two blocks away from the bar district— A gathering of females squeezed various things out of the males there, who were high on alcohol or drugs.

Arrangements were made through good old-fashioned direct negotiation.

As the street name indicated, the women were waiting for gods—or in other words, customers. There were all sorts, ranging from the women of classic yakuza to members of non-yakuza criminal groups, to runaway girls and women seeking sugar daddies.

These various women, from individuals to organizations, wore outfits that suited their personalities, and stood at the side of the road under the glow of the streetlights and the Monster Tonic vending machines that emitted a faint warmth, waiting to grab passing “gods.”

A modern-day brothel, a sales venue for corrupt sex fiends. It was a dangerous place; every dozen meters there was a group trying to make a profit—yakuza, gangs, and self-defense groups all mingled together.

For those with the support of organizations, there were love hotels. Built long ago, the abandoned buildings had been repaired via DIY, offering a variety of services in the renovated buildings, and where “private business” could be conducted close by.

There were also a few vans parked on the road.

The seats aside from the driver were paid for under the table in these “vanilla vans” that kept cushions and wet tissues on hand. They wafted with a scent much like vanilla, which encouraged copulation for Beastpeople.

Women posed suggestively around them.

One had an olive-brown-and-orange pelt, glossy under the light, with a narrow waist and full bust.

She hid her breasts with a risqué micro-bikini bra and wore a tight skirt around her hips.

The slutty golden hamster girl with gold piercings in her round ears flashed her underwear.

“—It’ll be three.”

“Y-yeah! Heh-heh-heh, nice, niiice!!”

The weasel man, who looked kind of like a gangster, was so worked up it was like he would jump on her at any minute as he handed her some cash.

When he pressed those bills rolled up and bound with a rubber band to her bikini’d chest, the female invited the male into the back a van— *Da-dun-dun!! Da-dun-dun! Da-dun-dun!!*

Suddenly, there was the echo of hooves hitting the pavement—crunching as it dug into it. The ring of hoofbeats, a sound no longer heard in modern society.

“...Hey, did you hear something strange?”

“Huh? Who cares. Let’s do it already.”

Surrounded by obscene pink lighting and cologne that excited the passions, the woman stripped off her bra.

The weasel man, distracted by the sway of her breasts as they bounced out, put a hand to his pants.

A rumble.

“Huh?”

All he could do was make that foolish-sounding noise of confusion.

As if in slow motion, the prostitution van’s door was busted through in a distinct U shape. The shape was from giant hooves, bigger than coconuts.

The weasel man who was taking off his pants and the hamster girl who was trying to service him completely failed to understand that something gigantic had kicked the car and sent it flying as they were spun like a blender, seat and all.

Spin, spin, spin, spin, bounce up, spin, fall, crash, tumble, and then—collision.

Explosion.

The smell of oil and the roar of fire. A nearby fire alarm apparently still worked, and it rang as the fire hydrant that crookedly stuck up from the street spewed a column of water. Lit by black-red flames, the dark-brown giant revealed itself.

“Bruh-huh-huh-huh-huh!”

It was a sound of wild delight. Laughter burst from the being’s upper body, which was clad in an out-of-place track jacket.

A centaur. Her lower body was that of a horse, but she was gigantic.

At three meters tall, she was brawnier than a massive draft horse, the imposing figure of a steed of the distant past. It was like heretical art, possessing both the massive body of the primitive mammals in fossils and the refined appearance of a thoroughbred.

The comparatively small upper body grew from where the neck would be on a horse.

The sleeves, tight from the muscles swelling within them, resembled hams. The track jacket’s front zipper was open all the way, with a bra holding a full chest and the remnants of a torn shirt sticking to her from sweat. Her face was hidden by disheveled hair and the antlers that grew from her forehead, but—
“Wh-what the heck is that?! A-a monster...?!”

“It’s a Mythic Beast! No way, for real?! Aren’t they super rare?!”

Two Beastpeople who had been passed out on the side of the road, drunk, were hit by the explosion and subsequent heat wave that forced them to open their eyes.

Witnessed up close, it was just like the ancient centaurs spoken of in myth and legend.

“A monster from long ago that’s gone extinct—the ones that were made from flesh and bone in museums!! The stuff everyone’s talking about, that’ll get you mad high and make you so damn strong the regular stuff can’t even compare!!”

“Huh?! What the heck, that’s not fair! Does that exist?!”

It was one of the plausible-sounding urban legends that went around the Beastperson special district.

Of the Monster Tonic that was sold on the market, the dominant enterprise, Beast Tech, sold three regular types and two special ones. There were Carnivore, Herbivore, and Reptiles and Amphibians, then the bird type that enabled flying—which was sold only at facilities where safety was guaranteed—plus a fish type that was sold mainly to pro divers for business use.

Rumors swirled about something that could get you high far beyond all those.

The ultimate high. It would awaken mysteries—the Mythic Beast Tonic.

The filthy, drunk rat men who'd been sleeping in the back alley were so intoxicated they weren't even afraid. They just remembered the legends as they looked up at the monster that stood in the flames.

"Fwooooooo...!!"

Those eyes—those completely intoxicated eyes made the observers start trembling.

"Oh crap...she's high as shit!! Run— Gyah!!"

"Hyeee?!"

The moment they turned around to flee, one of them died.

The giant galloped along. Stomped on by its great hooves like iron hammers, one of the rat man's skulls was shattered.

His blood and organs were like a churning bundle of udon noodles. Discarding the body that tangled around her hooves like a plastic bag, the centaur monster—the hit-and-run centaur—mercilessly pursued the other as he fled.

"Hyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

In an instant, she closed in.

She could stomp on him at any time. But she didn't. She pounded a *da-dun-dun, da-dun-dun* of U-shaped marks on the paved road.

Seeing the monster prance backward like she was playing with him, the rat man desperately yelled, "The hell, the hell is up with you, what the hell?! I

haven't done anything! I was just drinking and sleeping there! Stop it, forgive me...!"

"—!!"

There was joy in her eyes, which narrowed as she smirked.

She was clearly enjoying herself. It wasn't impulse or anger. She was just chasing the man because it was fun, meaning to rob him of his life. With a winny, she wet her lips with her tongue.

Right as she was just about to crush the skull of the rat man—

"Ah...?!" The hit-and-run centaur expressed her shock with her first humanlike sound.

Something had leaped out onto the road between her and the rat man.

Having gotten some momentum going, the massive centaur would not stop, and her hooves caught on that obstacle and kicked it into the air.

There was a metallic sound. Bouncing on the ground and then hitting it again hard— A wheelchair missing a wheel—and a girl.

"Hyeeeeeeeeee!!!"

The rat man fled. The centaur didn't follow—it wasn't the time for that.

With a splat, the girl who had been sent flying tumbled into a muddy puddle of the slums.

Covered in mud, her cheek scraped, blood overflowing from her nose as she was nearly run over, she choked out, "...Ngh, hah... I—I thought I was gonna die...!!" With arms that were just barely intact, she pushed her upper body off the ground.

Her lower body wouldn't move. She was dragging her weak legs behind her, but nevertheless, she faced forward.

"What're you doing, Mai?" she cried.

"Huh? Ah. Well, I *mean*. They...!" The Mythic Beast spoke with strange intonation, somehow like a chirping bird.

The girl in the tracksuit who was crawling on the ground—Mei Mezuki, looked

up at the giant with a groan.

“Is this supposed to be revenge? Who asked you for that?”

“But...*but*...they were *drinking*, and went *out* of control, and *then, they...!*”

The weak and the strong had been reversed.

The hit-and-run centaur, who had kicked away cars and crushed people under her hooves, was flinching and trembling before a girl who couldn’t even stand.

“It’s *people* like *them*! Who made it so *you* can’t run anymore!!” she cried, trying to shift blame away from herself.

It made Mei snap.

“Were you listening to me? Who asked you for that, you idiot?!” Her fist hit the ground, sending up a splash of mud.

“It’s frustrating! It makes me mad! Getting hit by some fool and having my dreams crushed!! They all piss me off, and I want to kill them. But if anyone’s gonna do it, it should be me, right?! I have to be the one to do it, or it’s just murder! Why are you doing it?! You dummy! Stupid!!”

“Ah...ahhhhhhhhhh...?!”

Showered by those childish insults, the hit-and-run centaur staggered backward a few steps.

Then she stripped off the track jacket she was wearing. Her naked breasts swayed.

Her school jacket for the Akanebara Municipal track club, which matched Mei’s, was thrown away, stained the color of mud.

The light of the streetlamps was dim.

Her hair was disheveled, antlers protruded from her head, and her eyes were bloodshot as they glowed with a piercing light.

And her face was that of a girl with an innocent, even childish look.

“I could tell!” Mei shouted. “Getting your socks all bloody; the stains won’t come out! Shoving it all into your track club locker; you’re so dumb! They stink! Of course I’m gonna notice!!”

That had happened the day before.

Mei had left the classroom, where she was uncomfortable, to go to the clubroom to slack off.

Noticing a disgusting smell, she'd opened a certain locker.

There were socks with fresh blood stains on them, coagulated like jelly, and an empty syringe— "If you don't want to get found out, then at least wash them properly or throw them away! That's irrefutable evidence!!"

She had immediately informed a teacher. But there had been nothing reported publicly, and she had continued to worry about what to do.

That morning, she had figured Mai would come to school, but Mei hadn't seen her, so then she figured she would find her here.

Mei had a feeling her friend had gone to the Masquerade. If someone didn't have a specific illness, the lawless town was the only place where someone not in the medical field would use a syringe.

And then Mai had happened upon the disturbance.

She'd come over to see an absolute numbskull wearing the track jacket of her school, laughing at people and running them down.

"What's wrong?" Mei demanded. "Say something. Just so you know: I'm really pissed."

"I—I. *Can't*—*forgive* them. That's why, all of them will..." She lifted a hoof with blood and flesh stuck to it. She wiped it in the mud as if trying to hide the sticky droplets of blood spatter, the coagulated clumps of brain still on it. Then she said, "I wanted to...kill them. I bought...the Tonic. When I got *high*, I could...do it...!!"

She gradually became more worked up, encouraged by her own words.

The hit-and-run centaur hugged herself, then touched her cheeks as if she were a maiden innocently daydreaming, but her hair was in disarray and dyed with speckles of blood. She leaned over.

Bending her forelegs, she extended her arm until it just about reached. "Mei... Get *on*?"

“Huh?” Responding to that invitation with a question, Mei blinked as she looked up at her unhinged schoolmate.

It was no lie or joke. Mai’s spellbound smile was that of a girl inviting a friend to the greatest party ever.

But it would certainly be a hellish celebration for mowing over drunks.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. Let’s crush these losers together and *play*? Feel *better*... It’s the *best*. It’s *fun*!!”

Licking her lips with a twisted smile—

This strange and grotesque thing that had originally been a sweet girl—

Just like what was left after warming a wax doll over a flame, it was broken.

“...Forget it!!”

Without hesitation, Mei knocked aside the hand extended to her.

“Righteous indignation has got to be fun, huh? Don’t make my misfortune into your heroic justice!!”

“...*Huh?*” The hit-and-run centaur froze as if to say she couldn’t understand this.

“Don’t think you can talk about my pain! My frustration!! My anger!! It’s mine! It’s my story, and mine alone!! Don’t pity me!! I don’t want your sympathy!!”

That’s right, Mei thought.

She didn’t mind empathy. But someone looking down on her and giving her sympathy—she absolutely did not want that.

Indeed, she had lost the use of her legs. She couldn’t run anymore, but...

She didn’t think she had become at all weak.

“Don’t assume I’ve given up over some stupid legs!! I’m going to win! I swear I’m going to win!! If I can’t run with my legs, I’ll run with my arms!! I don’t really know anything about it, but I’ll go to the Paralympics or whatever!!”

“Huh? Ah? Huh...? Ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhh...?!”

Strong, strong, strong, strong, strong.

Her own staunch resolve could be described in no other way.

It confused the centaur, making her back away.

Mei hit her with another remark.

“The future gold medals are mine! I don’t have the time to be killing some random drunks like you; that’s completely absurd! You dimwit! Just leave already!!”

“W-wah—but—I—did—it—*for*—you...!”

Her voice was broken, trembling.

But Mei’s words of condemnation did not stop.

“It wasn’t for me, what you did was for you. You went and made my trauma into your own story, and you killed people because you wanted to. I’m not the guilty one here.” Even so... “Turn yourself in... I don’t know what the police will say, and I don’t know if it’ll count as a crime. But I’ll apologize with you. I can bow my head, and I can take punishment—so go back.”

Tears brimmed in Mei’s eyes, her voice trembling.

Encouraging Mai to atone at the end—like a gasp, like a prayer.

“...*Mei!!*”

“—!!”

Without any further consideration, the hit-and-run centaur raised her murderous hooves high.

Rearing up, she was about to stomp on and kill the fallen girl.

“...Oh well.”

Mei closed her eyes to accept the hammer-like blow from the U-shaped iron bludgeons.

“I’ll die for you...Mai.”

“—Don’t just decide to die.”

Suddenly, in front of the girl's face, her expression filled with atonement— A third party she hadn't even been thinking about had whispered to her.

“Huh...? Argh?!”

Right after that came intense pain in her stomach. Impact. A figure that wavered like mist had cut in to kick Mei in the stomach, sending her flying to a spot out of the centaur's reach.

Mei rolled on the ground. Covered in trash and vomit, she fell into a ditch with a wet splash. In pain, she cracked open her eyes. The hooves were falling in slow motion. The head of the person who had taken her place had been split open.

“Ahh!!”

Mei Mezuki, the girl who hadn't cried even when she was about to die.

But upon witnessing the head of the friend she'd only just made—stepped on and crushed like breaking a watermelon...

Upon witnessing the “death” of the boy Reiji Kasumi, his body broken and flung away—she cried and screamed.

*

As Mei's scream rang out, two people stood on a ruined building overlooking that gruesome scene.

A man and a girl perched as if floating on the crumbling roof.

“Is that the favorite you were talking about?” asked the girl.

“Yeah,” replied the man. “He's still a newbie, but he's very good.”

The man wore a jacket and turtleneck in subdued colors.

His tall stature and refined features went well with glasses, giving him the appearance of both dignity as an intellectual and a sense of playfulness. He was the sort of person students would describe as a fun university professor.

“A vampire, was he? But it really seems like that would kill him.”

“No, no, no, no, no, you've got it wrong. He's not a vampire.”

The girl standing beside him was on her phone.

She looked to be about twelve or thirteen. She had an innocent, pretty face and long white hair, which made her seem coolheaded but also charming.

With her delicate, slender figure and youthful skin, she was just like porcelain—like a delicate work of art.

“But his records say he is. Was that a lie?”

“It wasn’t a lie. Do you want to know what he really is?”

“It’s annoying, the way you’re building up to it. Talking like that will get you disliked at cabaret clubs. Can you not?”

“...To get to the point, there was no other genus we could classify him as. City hall wouldn’t acknowledge a unique classification and had no choice but to use one that was just slightly related.”

The man spoke quickly, as if flustered by her sharp comment.

“Reiji Kasumi. Yes, that boy is actually...”

*

In the back alley, the curtain rose on a tragedy.

A shattered skull—scattered fragments of bone, meat, and fresh blood crumbled apart in the blink of an eye, becoming a black mist that spread.

“Ahhhhhhhh?! Gah?! Ahhhhhhhhh?!”

The completely confused hit-and-run centaur went into a frenzy in the black mist. Wildly bucking, the clanging of her hooves rang out, but the shapeless mist only drifted around, and there was no impact—instead, it rose and enveloped her.

A sticky black fluid clung to the centaur’s face, arms, legs, nipples.

“...It’s not sticking to me...?” Mei said in wonder.

The fallen girl tried to touch the wafting mist, but it slipped right through her fingers, leaving a strange, slick sensation between them, but not even the faintest stain.

As the black mist rapidly filled the whole back alley...

Mei’s eyes saw it clearly.

A headless figure, the remains of the boy she had only just made friends with...

...was hovering in the mist like a doll in a shadow play.

As if his body was a champagne bottle with the cork popped off or a balloon with a hole in it...

The black mist continuously gushed from where his head had been shattered and torn off.

“A snake...?!”

Slithering.

Some of the matte-black mist condensed and raised its head like a snake. While making a *slither-slither* sound, it crawled along the road and wall, surrounding the rampaging centaur before it struck.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!”

There was the sound of countless thrusts. Over and over and over and over again. The shadow puppet snake had suddenly become a spearpoint with a Gothic-style decoration, and from the ground, from the wall—from about every direction—spears shot out to impale the centaur, withdrawing only to pierce her again.

“Ow!! Ow, that *hurts!!* What—*is* this—*stabbing*...?!”

When the hit-and-run centaur flailed and writhed in pain, the Gothic spears of condensed black mist broke like glass.

The shattered fragments once again melted into air, becoming fine black particles that mingled with the mist.

The mist formed new spears, and the spearpoints aimed for the centaur’s legs, chest, sides, neck, every bone, muscle, artery, and eyeball, stabbing into them.

Is that...a cage?! It’s a cage of blood...mist. Her legs, under her arms, her back...they’re stabbing her with incredible accuracy...!

That was the one thing Mei could understand, just looking up at the sight in a

daze.

The attack combined restraints that immobilized its prey with blades that wounded and tormented it, weakening the victim.

Assault launched, the headless shadow continued to glide through the mist.

“Gyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!” She cried like an insect. Her powerful arms were at full strength.

Her thick arms, with blood vessels popping, churned through the mist, scattering it before it became spears. The hit-and-run centaur just barely delayed the moment she would be stabbed, making to escape.

But there was no getting away.

The heart beat in the headless corpse as it continued to move through the mist in an odd dance. *Badum-badum*.

The sound of a heartbeat shouldn’t have been audible. The question of why it could be heard was immediately clear.

I feel it...through my skin and ears, to my bones—!!

Every place that touched the black mist—not just the skin on her arms and legs, but into her ears and to the back of her throat with each breath, all the way to her heart— Each and every one of those invisible, tiny particles was a heart, was blood, and...

“Is that *you*?!”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

The headless corpse regained its head.

The black mist condensed, with the part of his face that had been hidden by his mask now exposed.

For an instant, the mist coalesced into the colorless silhouette of a young man, like a black-and-white ink painting. Then the color snapped back into place as his body became solid again.

“Vampire. By the categorization on my Specials Management Ledger, I’m a vampire, but our boss says that I’m actually something else.”

A Brocken.

In mist deeper than darkness, one might see abnormal shapes.

As Mei's eyes were glued to the mist, the being told her with an unconcerned expression, "I don't know specifically what sort of thing I am. Since the category is like a reference to—a strained interpretation of—the Brocken specter...where shadows take on strange shapes due to light shining through mist."

So it was meaningless.

What was he? None could explain it.

"But I'm not human. I have to take Human Tonic, not Monster Tonic, every day, or I can't even maintain human form. I'm a sort of airy, defective product."

"Gah...ahhhhhhhhh!!"

In the mist, the centaur struggled, breaking off the spears that continued to stab into her.

She moved to attack Reiji, raising a fist about the size of a coconut or bowling ball, but...

"Even a monster...can be a weapon, if used well."

The giant loomed behind him.

Without any fear or shock, Reiji Kasumi just bent his finger.

"Monochrome Mist Style—Wounding Black Prison."

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

Instantly—the mist became spears, a cage, then a prison much denser than before.

Vertically, horizontally, diagonally. The Gothic spears branched off and spread, assaulting the centaur's whole body—piercing it.

"Ah...ah...!! Ow...that—hurts...!!"

The prison creaked audibly.

Even with every single part of her body pierced, leaving no open spot of skin, the centaur struggled and writhed.

“Human Tonic is rare. It’s not sold on the market, and I can’t get insurance. So it’s expensive.” With empty eyes, Reiji looked up at the centaur as if observing some bug he had caught, even disinterested in the girl’s chest, the mounds transformed by her developed pectoral muscles. “In other words, I need money. Once you’re human, it’s all about money. You need to buy food. You need to pay for a home. You need clothes. And I want someone to spend time with. Being ‘normal’...is hard.”

To have time to be normal.

To keep being human.

He was in the cleaning trade, making the extermination of “pests” his occupation.

“Sorry. This is as far as you go—hit-and-run centaur.”

“Shut...uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!”

A shriek. The centaur flailed, and the black cage shattered.

The fragments instantly became mist, dissolving into the air like sugar cubes melting into tea.

Even with holes gouged in her whole body, having shaken free of her constraints, the centaur hit Reiji with a tremendous slap.

But...it just cut through air, without even making a wafting sound.

“Huh...uh...?!”

“I am mist. Even if I take human form, my body is nothing more than droplets.”

Right before he was struck, his outline blurred, and the slap passed through him just like it would a mirage.

“Ugahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

She stomped her hooves like she was having a tantrum. Her massive body, more than a few tons, shook the ground and cracked the pavement.

She was rampaging so hard one could practically see the shock waves with the naked eye. But Reiji was like a cloud, like mist, like a shadow—appearing

around the centaur monster, he was stepped on and churned up, only to materialize once more.

“His color...changed?”

That was when Mei suddenly saw it.

Without a sound, the color of the mist around the hit-and-run centaur changed all at once from matte black like charcoal to a dull white or gray, like endlessly falling ash.

“Tsk!”

The moment the hit-and-run centaur touched the mist, now changed to white, her skin was burned raw.

There was a sound like tossing butter onto a hot iron pan. Caught by the clinging white mist and the black prison, and with her wounds failing to heal, the monster was enveloped by a powerfully acidic haze that brimmed with an intense chemical smell.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh?!”

Her eyes grew cloudy as it entered her nose and throat. The moment she cried out, she sucked in the powerful acidic white mist along with oxygen.

All her membranes burned. Her skin melted and peeled off. *Shriek, shriek, shriek*. A screaming, writhing giant.

As the centaur was thrashing in pain, Mei, who was lying not far away, started reaching out her hand.

“Don’t touch her,” said Reiji. “You’ll get hurt, too.”

“What...did you do...? What did you do to her?!” Mei cried out.

All the while, the white acid mist twined around the hit-and-run centaur.

It was just like bandages wrapping around a corpse, covering every part of her body.

“I told you. I’m microscopic droplets.”

The *badump* of a heartbeat came once more.

Instantly, Reiji's whole body turned to mist.

He seemed to have vanished, mingling with the haze around him, but then just as quickly, the mists solidified near Mei, with his heart connected to them.

He moved almost instantaneously. His body disintegrated and then recomposed itself in the blink of an eye, less than a second. He grabbed Mei's hand to stop her from reaching out to the centaur and whispered in her ear, "Think of the concept as similar to nano-size blocks. Through the combination and linking of particles, I can make up all sorts of substances. For example, hard objects like that cage before."

And like the white mist that was attacking the centaur right now.

"As mist, I can manipulate some simple chemical properties. If I decrease the hydrogen ions, water is acid, turning it to a toxic substance that inflames skin and melts flesh if touched."

"Acid... So then all the mist around her?!"

"Yeah. Her lungs and trachea will become inflamed, and her eyeballs and skin burn and melt. It's an acidic mist."

It was an incredibly cruel method of execution.

"Monochrome Mist Style—Cruel Dream of White Mist."

Once it was inside someone, they would melt into mush and die painfully.

"That's basically my stomach. She won't be nutritious, but I'll digest all of it." He didn't say it with pride, not even with a smile. Reiji just spoke the facts.

And Mei fought him.

"...Stop it!!"

She desperately reached out to touch him, but she couldn't get ahold of Reiji, and she grasped at air.

"What have you done?! I didn't ask you to save me!!"

"You're the one who called us friends."

"...Huh?"

That unexpected remark made Mei freeze.

“Friends should be helped. I think that’s common sense in human society; am I wrong?”

“No, that’s right. But I...!”

Mei had gone to this town, even with no guarantee she’d find Mai.

She’d come to a haunt for the same trash who had broken her back—to a place she never wanted to visit. For a reason...

“—I came ready to die! I wanted to stop that stupid junior of mine...!”

“Is that really true?”

A quiet question.

All the while, the hit-and-run centaur was surrounded by acid and writhed, already charred around the edges.

“Even if you die, she won’t stop,” he said. “She’s not doing it for you.”

The reason the hit-and-run centaur continued to run people down—it was...

“Because it was fun to kill people out of righteous indignation,” he continued. “It was fun to kill people she believed to be evil with the cudgel of justice. You said it yourself, Mei.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But still...still...!!”

Even if she was just being used.

The white-collar workers who opened the way for her on the train, the people who were lured by points to treat her kindly—and how messed up she felt when hopeless misery and spurning their forced consideration triumphed over any gratitude.

Yet no matter what—

“I came because I wanted to save her!!”

No matter how miserable she was...

...that was not a reason to abandon a friend.

“Mai is a damn awful person, but even so, I—! I can’t put it quite right, but...!!

You can't just kill her!! She'll die with an empty head, not regretting anything, not even really understanding where she went wrong!!"

Mei didn't want that. That was no good. She felt it was wrong.

"If you're going to kill her, then kill me, too!! So...I'm begging you, stop...please...!" Mei cried out, her face a mess with tears.

The hit-and-run centaur writhed in the acid mist.

Her joints, where the skin and flesh were thin, had already melted, and bones were even becoming visible.

"...I see."

Reiji thought it was pretty illogical.

It was different than simple favoritism toward your own. She understood the hit-and-run centaur's crimes, and despite that, this girl begged for Mai's life to be spared, and was even offering her own.

It wasn't about simply judging evil as evil, killing them and leaving it at that.

This was to teach evil that they were evil first, before judging them as a human being.

"Ah... I see."

Broken. An elusive monster of vapor without form.

His molded, artificial heart thudded hard.

That was the reason, the root cause for the creature that was Reiji Kasumi deciding he was human and wishing to be normal.

"...Fine, Ikka."

He'd had a twin sister.

Their faces were very similar, but their hearts seemed to be completely opposite.

She was friendly and kind to everyone—unlike him, who always put up walls with others.

"I'm sure Mom and Dad will understand—that you're not a monster, Bro—

you're really kind!"

"You're the kind one," he'd said many times.

It was in the spring of his twelfth year. His whole body had come apart to become mist, and his parents, trembling in fear at the monster that filled his room, had stuck duct tape in every crevice of his room shutting him in an airtight space, pretending he didn't exist.

They told everyone that it was a sudden illness. They claimed he was refusing to leave his room. They became those poor parents with a pitiful child. And all the while, his sister had defended him. She had given him food, provided snacks, and played with him.

—!!

But his sister had died.

Just remembering it hurt enough to crush his shapeless heart.

She was the one who should have had a happy life. She should have gotten married and had children and grown old and died like a normal person.

But the monster had been the one to survive.

That's why I have to become "normal."

The hamster his sister had kept—it didn't like him at all. Every time he gave it food, it bit him.

The clothes his sister had loved. Fluttery skirts, charming.

Unfortunately, they don't look good on me.

The crepes she had wanted to eat. The shopping malls she had wanted to explore. The time she had wanted to spend with her friends.

Everything, everything, all of it.

To get it back. To live just as normally.

To protect someone's happiness, enough for his sister as well—the monster lived his life yearning for normalcy.

...Szzzz!!

There was a sound like water sizzling on a hot stone, and then the swirling acid mist converged.

Reiji Kasumi hid his face with a scarf of thin haze. For whatever reason, even the clothes on his back were transformed into minute particles for a time, then came together into their exact original form.

“Ah...geh...”

“So she’s alive. The Mythic Tonic really is amazing,” Reiji said.

The hit-and-run centaur was lying on the ground.

In the back alley, melted into mud, lay a giant with all the skin and membranes of her body peeled off.

It was such a miserable sight you would assume it was a corpse, but she was breathing, her limbs continuing to spasm, and already the skin was starting to regenerate all over her body, recovering at a frightening speed, but...

“Even with the super recovery of a Mythic Beast, she can’t possibly heal fully before the supplement wears off. Since she’ll be hideously burned all over even once in human form, there will certainly be scars and aftereffects. It would be mercy to kill her. But even then?”

“Of course.” Mei didn’t hesitate. “Our punishment is to live on miserably—with our mistakes, being humiliated, suffering our whole lives... So help her.”

Mei wouldn’t run from the incidents she’d caused, the people she’d killed, the things she had broken.

Her words were an unshakable declaration that she would take on that burden, even understanding it was painful.

“So she says, but...just to confirm, is that all right, Boss?” Reiji addressed someone else.

“You’re so obvious,” someone responded. “You intended that from the start, didn’t you?”

Mei looked up in surprise.

“Huh?!”

A man in a suit appeared from a nearby ruin, a building with a view out over the back alley.

Frivolous yet dignified, with the style of a playboy trying to look cool but also seeming strangely scholarly, he plugged his nose against the powerful chemical smell wafting through the back alley as he snapped his fingers.

“There’s no crime, investigation, or responsibility in this town anyway,” said the “Boss.” “After cleaning things up, we send her to the hospital, I suppose?”

“That all sounds fine,” said Getsu, “but, Boss, please help us carry this; how many tons is it?!”

“No way; it’s too heavy. Get going and do your jobs, laborers.”

“This sucks... This job is hell...”

The wolf man—Getsu—showed up with a special mask that properly covered his nose and mouth. It had to have been made for canines.

“Nice work. You handle the rest,” said Reiji.

“Help me a little, here?!” Getsu cried. “Doing it in such a damn nasty way, I could die just from the smell...”

Parked behind them was a trailer. It flashed a bright light over the dark alley as about a dozen brawny Beastpeople stepped into the alley with various tools—cleaning overalls, plastic bags and mops.

The logo on all the tools and their uniforms read **BEAST TECH**.

“...Is that your employer?” Mei said, pointing at the logo.

Reiji shook his head disinterestedly.

“The car and tools are their equipment. We’re subcontractors.”

“That’s why we don’t make much,” Getsu added. “...And hey, I never got to do anything!”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t. That makes arranging for the cleanup easier. Can we get out of here in five minutes?”

“For sure. Awright, the hook is in. Good to go, good to go!”

A winch groaned, making a rusty creaking sound.

“Is it okay to touch that? You won’t get burned?” Mei asked.

“No,” Reiji answered. “It’s harmless; the body is only wet with water now. It stinks a bit, but forgive me for that.”

As the two of them were speaking, the workers began a process much like a tow truck moving a car.

The men in overalls briskly fixed wires to the flesh of the weakened giant centaur as she spasmed, then attached a hook to them, and pulled her up with a winch installed on the trailer to pack her into the vehicle.

“...Will she be okay? She’ll be saved, right?” Mei asked nervously.

“Arrangements were made quickly. We’ve called for the company medical team; she’ll be saved.” The one to answer her question was neither Getsu nor Reiji, but the man in the strange suit. “If they can be convinced, I’d like her arrested and no more—on Reiji’s request. Since the culprit is a student from the outside, we should consider the possibility of room for reform. Isn’t that kind?”

“...She clearly seemed like she was on the verge of mass murder, though?!” said Mei.

“Of course. She tried to kill Mei.” While skillfully putting a cover over the centaur they’d packed into the trailer, Getsu chimed in before he turned around. “You came here to talk her out of it, right, Mei?”

“...You mean you even anticipated that?”

“You were both in the track club, and there’d be no other reason for her to come to a place like this.”

That’s why...

“Letting her live, capturing her, and treating her was an option. I went to go get transport and a doctor. Then Reiji was tasked with capturing her. Well, the fact was: She was ready to kill even a friend and convincing her didn’t work. So of course you might want to just kill her—”

The man in the suit followed up after Getsu, wagging his finger.

“This is going rather far for just clumsily taking things out on others.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Leave her treatment to us. Since the Mythic Tonic was leaked from the company, we must look into how it got out. Though the perpetrator at the end of that chain might not have that information...,” the man in the suit said to Reiji, then he stuck a hand in his pocket.

He brought out a plain bottle. It had a medical ampoule with a label on it in a language Mei had never seen before, along with a syringe and needle in a sealed plastic bag.

He tossed it to Reiji.

“Give yourself a shot. We can’t have you getting all smoky.”

“...Yes, sir.”

The black mist grabbed it from midair, peeling off the packaging to extract the drug.

That clear substance looked like just water at a glance, bobbing in the air as it was injected into Reiji’s arm, pushing the contents into his body. Then the boy’s hazy outline solidified into something clear.

“Is that...the Human Tonic?”

“Yup. The ordinary Tonics are a combination of animal flesh and fur, but this uses human DNA. It’s a special compound, so it’s fairly expensive. It’s enough that I would cry if I couldn’t use my employee discount.”

“...So you get an employee discount. Is this a regular nine-to-five or what...?” Mei said, exasperated.

“A run-of-the-mill nine-to-five would have been a little easier.”

Now having regained human shape, Reiji gestured to the man in the suit.

“Let me introduce you. That suspicious old man is the management contractor for the Masquerade, his business being street cleaning.”

Taking over from there, the man in the suit pulled a business card out from somewhere.

Squatting down, he held it out to Mei, who was still lying there in the mud.

“Monster Tonic development, marketing, and wholesale. Subsidiary to the General Mythic company Beast Tech—Fantastic Sweeper. I’m the company owner, Narasaki. Good to meet you.”

“Huh...?!” Looking up at him skeptically, she accepted the card.

With the bustle of cleanup around them, the hit-and-run centaur incident came to a close.

*

“I heard she was saved. Thanks.”

In the Akanebara Municipal High School courtyard, they were pushing a wheelchair on the open lawn path.

Getsu, Mei, and Reiji were strolling along with convenience store lunches in hand.

“She was burned all over, though. I’m impressed she’s alive,” said Mei.

“With the vitality of a Mythic Beast, she would have healed some before the Tonic effects wore off, but still...,” said Reiji.

“Yeah. Never mind a testimony, it’s not even certain if she’ll regain consciousness. That’s what the doctor said.”

Getsu was pushing Mei’s wheelchair, while Reiji seemed to be enjoying the breeze blowing through the courtyard.

Mei’s expression seemed tired...but also somehow brighter.

“...Her parents came to visit her. I got to meet them for the first time.”

“I see... What were they like?”

“Normal. A really normal office worker and a housewife. They didn’t know she was doing something like this. They were crying so much, apologizing, saying ‘We’re sorry, we’re sorry...’” Just remembering had to be tough. As profoundly as if she were letting out all-too-painful memories, Mei continued, “They said the family would do what they could to make up for the people their daughter killed. They said they plan to keep working, but they want to sell their house and car and everything and investigate the identities of the victims... I can’t

really say for sure, but I guess that's fine."

"It's no use," Reiji said. "People basically never care about who's responsible for killing in the Masquerade."

"Why? People have died!"

"Simply because their identities are unknown. You can't identify the victims, then you can't prove that they're human."

The beasts who gathered in that town had removed the shackles of society.

Turning off their phones, forgetting about social media, not carrying ID.

So their identities couldn't be determined, and their deaths were always just treated as animal death.

Therefore, no one could atone, and neither would anyone make accusations.

"They're going to do it anyway... They seemed like that sort of people to me."

"...I see."

Was it out of kindness, or a feeling of responsibility for them to acknowledge the crime their daughter had committed and try to atone?

None of the trio would know.

"They must have been close... Is that how normal families are?"

"Don't ask me. Mine fell apart when I was twelve," Reiji said with a fed-up expression, searching inside the convenience store bag he carried.

The rice ball he pulled out seemed handmade. Peeling off the plastic wrap over the sticky seaweed, he looked up at the flowers with names he didn't know blooming in the treetops against the blue sky.

"You're the one who picked the hard road," Reiji said. "Commit to it."

"Of course," Mei replied. "But you guys are coming to school like normal. Is that okay? Isn't there an investigation and stuff?"

"It's fine," Getsu told her. "We went through a lotta trouble to put together the paperwork and enter school the legit way! We gotta get our money's worth."

“Indeed,” Reiji agreed. “It would be a waste. We paid tuition, too.”

“I see... Then we’re classmates, for the time being.”

That remark seemed like nothing. But they could both tell she was glad.

“And hey, Reiji, don’t just be the only one eating. Let’s sit down, first,” said Getsu.

“Though it may be mildly bad manners, I have no social media to deduct points from me. That’s the privilege of someone who doesn’t participate in society.”

“Wash your hands, at least,” said Mei. “Here, puppy dog, give him a tissue.”

“Sure... Wait, by puppy dog, you mean me?! That’s discrimination!”

The trivial conversation put smiles on their faces.

Reiji looked at the sky, bringing his salty rice ball to his mouth as the wind blew through.

Eating food with friends under the sun. I can talk with them. I can connect with them. Am I “normal” now...? Am I living just as Ikka wished?

He didn’t know. His dead sister couldn’t answer.

But he didn’t think he’d reached the wrong place.

“With our mistakes, being humiliated, suffering our whole lives—,” Reiji muttered.

“We’ll live on,” Mei finished for him. “That’s the atonement for her mistakes...” She looked at the sky. “And for myself... What’ll you do?”

“The same thing.”

In this unhinged world, in this broken era—

“I’ll live normally. That’s what I promised.”

Then his mutter vanished into the wind.

“...On Sunday. After I’ve gone to the hospital to visit her, I want to go look at clothes and stuff,” said Mei.

“What? You can’t be telling me to come with you?” said Reiji.

“Come on, you should go!” Getsu cut in. “That stuff is ‘normal’ and ‘enjoying your youth,’ you know!”

“You come, too. You dress like a rural delinquent; it’s so lame.”

“Huh? For real?! This is lame?! I was sure it was cool, though?!”

While walking side by side—their new lives began.

*

“Three more?”

It was a habit particular to the type of person called collectors, connoisseurs, or people of refined tastes.

Wherever they were, any space they inhabited for a long time—be it a bedroom, study, or office, regardless of it being private or official—they would fill it with whatever they loved so they could always look at the items.

The Fantastic Sweeper president’s office in the Masquerade—Natsukibara—also followed that trend and was buried in mysterious curios and oddities that Narasaki had gathered.

Mainly, there were specimens: countless butterfly specimens with wings spread, wafting with the camphor smell of the preservative, seashells and taxidermy, fossils and skeletons. He even had some with clearly abnormal shapes, revealing a part of an extensive collection.

Sitting among all that was a stately desk. The single board had been harvested from a humungous oak tree hundreds of years old, and since the large trees no longer existed on the planet, it was now impossible to acquire, giving the desk an astronomical value.

Narasaki cradled a phone on his shoulder. He was using an analog rotary phone, an antique these days—still in operation in the Masquerade, where the use of cell phones, smartphones included, was looked upon coldly.

He listened to the voice coming from it.

“Aside from this incident, another three Mythic Tonic samples were taken from the research lab.”

Hearing that report, Narasaki’s brow furrowed in exasperation.

“Was it the prescription product?”

“It was the pre-prescription undiluted solution. When diluted, one could maintain effects for about thirty days.”

“...Who was the fool who left something like that in a place it could be stolen?”

“The company executives are in quite a fluster trying to figure out who’s responsible. We have investigated, but no clues yet.”

“So in short, this isn’t the result of the company VIPs quarreling or sabotaging each other, but the work of an outsider... And about that high school girl...the perpetrator slash victim, the centaur?”

“We investigated what she’d been up to behind the scenes, but currently, there’s nothing... Though we’ll be continuing to investigate.”

“Then if I’m understanding correctly, the culprit stole a super-dangerous drug from the top-secret warehouse of a company with deadly-strict security and gave it to a random high school girl with low self-esteem and no connection to them at all, basically for free?”

“...”

The silence on the other end was a passive affirmation.

“That clearly wouldn’t be worth their while. Could it be either a crime committed for pleasure—or for religious or ideological reasons?”

“Who knows? Or...maybe it didn’t matter who they gave it to.”

Narasaki hung up the phone with a *ka-chack* and reached over the desk. His meerschaum pipe, the color of amber from many years of use, sat upon a pipe rest. He took it and pulled leaves out from a humidity-controlled storage cabinet, lightly packing them into the pipe and lighting it with a match.

He softly blew out a lazy trail of smoke. He didn’t puff at it restlessly like a cigarette, but used it as a method to relax himself, as the tobacco lovers of the early twentieth century enjoyed it.

“So it should happen right about now, I suppose?”

As he muttered that quietly while surrounded by smoke...

...on the same day, at the same time, in the same town but someplace else...

His worries were actualized.

*

At a certain hospital in the city, in the intensive care unit.

Wrapped in bandages, hooked up to medical machines through countless tubes, a girl slept.

She was an incredibly pitiful sight to see, but even so, her parents restrained their tears and continued to watch her.

They knew the crime their daughter had committed. They were prepared to atone. But...

"I can't post anything on social media," said her mother.

"Just as I thought," her father said. "...Neither can I. Just what is going on?"

Displayed on the phones in their hands, on the home screen of their social media was the merciless FROZEN.

The incident had happened, their daughter had been taken to the hospital, much evidence had been shown to them, and even if they hadn't been charged with a crime, countless murders and acts of destruction had been substantiated. And so they had confessed on social media to do penance for those crimes, but right after that...

Within seconds of publicizing everything, their screens were frozen, and it had remained like that for days.

"I tried making an inquiry at the company head office, but they wouldn't listen," said her father. "Maybe I should try the government office..."

"I don't understand," said his wife. "What did the police say?"

"They keep insisting that such an incident never happened... What should we do...?!"

They wouldn't acknowledge the crime.

They wouldn't mete out punishment.

It was as if they were averting their eyes.

The criminal and her parents were expelled from society, standing side by side in this tiny hospital room.

Ticktock, ticktock...

“Huh?” The father suddenly noticed the sound of an analog clock, which was rare in that day and age.

He searched for the source of the sound. He looked everywhere, from the medical devices at the bedside to the out-of-place cake box.

Just a moment ago, a nurse who had come to check on them had stood right there.

“Did she forget this...?”

Right as the father recalled that and reached out for the cake box...

An explosion.

The explosives connected to the analog clock in the cake box violently detonated.

The anti-terrorist, anti-explosion construction of the intensive care room fulfilled its duty, and the shock wave did not get outside, limiting the destruction to the room.

Black smoke and fire, the piercing ring of the automatic fire-extinguishing system. Screams, stench, heat.

There were three victims.

The culprit in a string of murders, the hit-and-run centaur, aka Mai Ikeda, first-year student at Akanabara Municipal High School, died instantly.

Her mother and father also died instantly. The cause of death was the bomb that had been set up there.

Three minutes after the incident, a claim of responsibility was posted on the dark web with a longwinded enumeration of political demands: All the standard lines about gender equality, saving sexual minorities, and fighting all sorts of discrimination and whatnot.

It didn't touch on why they had expressly targeted the intensive care ward of a hospital and the family, and after the heading INVESTIGATION REQUIRED was added on the police file, a few antiestablishment guerrillas were exposed and confessed to the crime.

A cover-up.

On the phone of a certain nurse.

In an anonymous private message sent to her social media account.

Congratulations. Your contribution to social order has achieved a score of A+.

Credit score +1000. As a special bonus, you are to be granted a promotion to our medical department.

We thank you for your cooperation

For order in the new era. —Beast Tech.

If there is no one to speak the truth, then it can be overwritten with lies.

In a controlled society, that was an all-too-grotesque "normal."

MONSTERHOLIC

GLOSSARY

CONFIDENTIAL

01. WORD

SPECIAL PERMANENT BEASTS (SPECIALS)

02. MEANING

The descendants of ancient Mythic Beasts. They have limited rights—in other words, they are not bound by the rules, but are outcasts of society who naturally receive no protections.

03. IMAGE



BEAST
PERSON

01. WORD

MYTHIC BEASTS

02. MEANING

Ancient monsters spoken of in myths and legends. Many believe the rumors that say there exists a Tonic that can transform people into these legendary monsters.

03. IMAGE

NOT
FOUND
???



MONSTERHOLIC

CONFIDENTIAL

GLOSSARY

01. WORD

MONSTER TONIC

02. MEANING

A miracle drug that can temporarily transform the user into an anthropomorphic creature. The tonics sold on the market can't guarantee what people will turn into, and even if they choose the "carnivore" flavor, they can't choose whether they'll be a dog, fox, or wolf.



carnivore



herbivore



reptiles and
amphibians

03. IMAGE

01. WORD

THE MASQUERADE

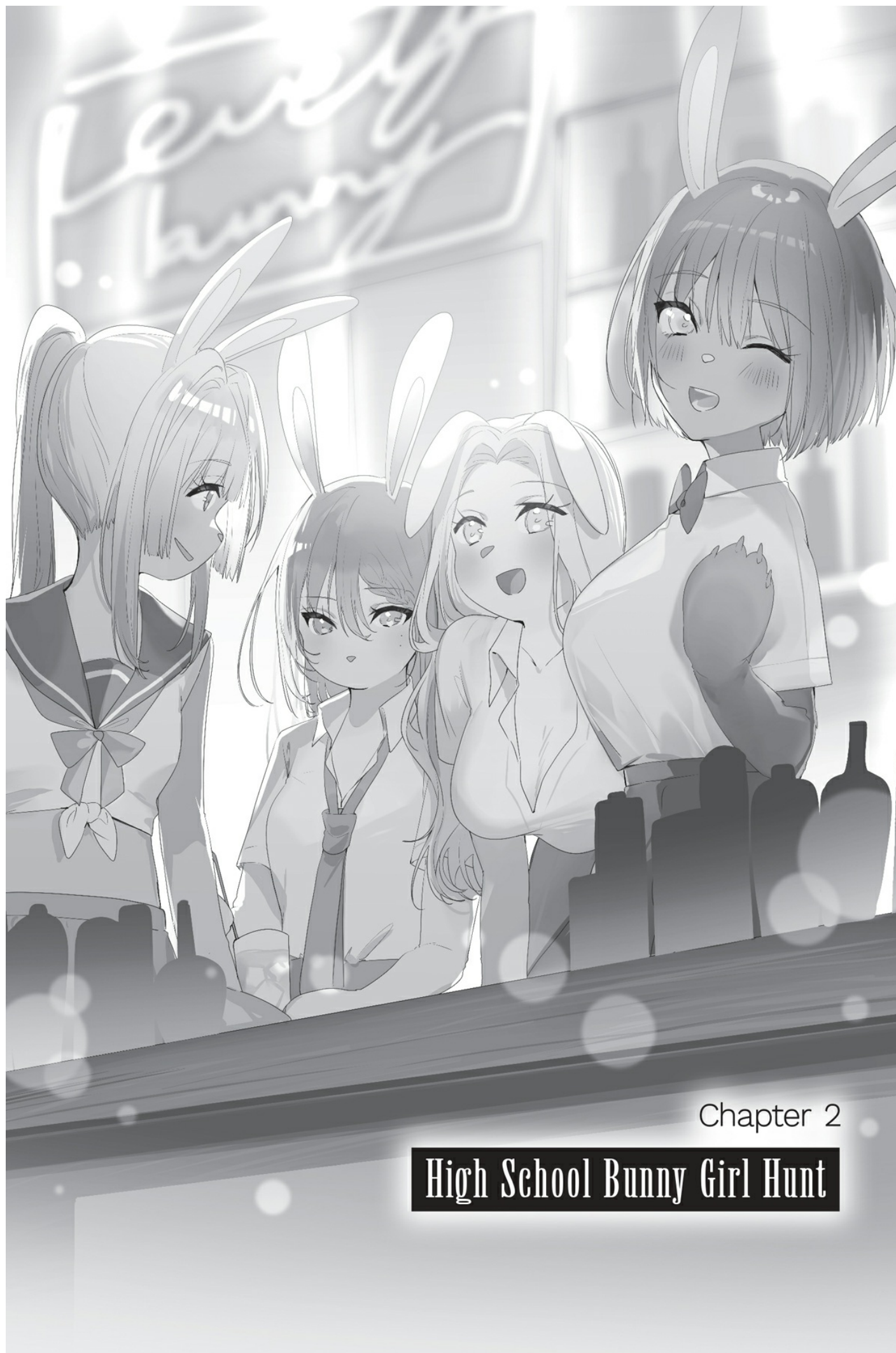
02. MEANING

The special district where use of Monster Tonic has been legally approved, as a way to blow off steam in this controlled society. Currently, this is the only neighborhood in Akitsushima where anonymity is possible.

03. IMAGE



NO IMAGE



Chapter 2

High School Bunny Girl Hunt

No matter the place or era, or whether it changes form due to different religions or conditions—

So long as humans are social creatures, funerals and practices to mourn lost loved ones will never cease.

Though the edge of religiosity had been removed from the rituals in this certain place in Kyoto, Akitsushima, repose for the soul was still well expressed by the three coffins wrapped in white cloth and the modest offering of flowers on the podium.

“Hey.”

“Well, this is a lonely event. Just us?”

“So you did come, thanks. I did tentatively try getting in contact with some distant relatives, but...”

There was just one guest sitting all alone in her uniform in a wheelchair.

The former hit-and-run centaur—Mai Ikeda—had been her junior at the track club and a first-year at Akanebara High School. The only ones to attend her and her parents’ funeral, and mourn their deaths, was Mei Mezuki and the strange pair who had just appeared.

Special Permanent Beasts and transfer students Reiji Kasumi and Getsu Raisan—only the three of them attended.

“...they said they didn’t want to go to the funeral of some relatives they’d never met,” Mei finished.

“...That’s harsh,” was the only response Reiji was able to give.

Getsu, who had been the one to ask initially, just nodded and gazed at the three coffins and portraits of the dead sadly lined up.

They had only heard about the bomb terrorism at the hospital just a few hours earlier. By that time, the arrangements for the funeral had already been made, and this farewell would be done in less than an hour, the cremated bodies put in a joint burial in a locker-like public grave.

Practically in a daze over these all-too-sudden events, Mei said, “...She did

something that could never be forgiven. There was no way she could've avoided getting judged by the law."

Mei had been prepared for that.

She had been prepared to take responsibility for the same crime, as the one who had been the inspiration for the murders.

"If you consider what she did, it wouldn't have been strange for her to get the death penalty. And even if they didn't charge her for a crime, she would have had to deal with it her whole life. But this... I just can't believe it."

Her hands shook in frustration, clenched fists trembling.

Getsu stood beside her, and if he had been in werewolf form, he would have been whining with his tail hanging limp.

Reiji looked fine, but his gaze on the funeral portraits contained complicated emotions.

"It feels strange. For her to be erased like this when we did all that to save her."

"Yeah, of course... I never even got to talk to her," Getsu agreed.

Whatever her reasons may have been, she was still certainly a murderer.

There was no room for excess sympathy. But since it had happened right when she'd been about to atone for her crimes with the support of her family, it hurt like thorns stabbing into the heart.

And it hurt even more sharply and deeply the closer one was to her.

"Why did she have to die? Getting blown up, at a hospital and all... It's unbelievable. The police said it was terrorism, but is that really what it was? Come on!" Mei cried.

The Specials could not answer.

"...Tell me. Please...!" she pleaded in tears.

But the two of them could not reply.

"Even if we wanted to tell you, we don't know anything... There's no way for us to answer," said Reiji.

“We’re not police, after all,” said Getsu. “If we leave this area, we don’t even have proper citizenship.”

Within the Masquerade, their company had the right to protect public safety in the name of pest extermination.

The two of them were in the position to be entrusted with that and carry it out. But if they left this city, then they were no more than animals whose identities were just barely protected by Beast Tech, with minimal societal participation allowed.

So they essentially had no way to respond to the massacre of this family in a hospital room explosion, but...

“This is just speculation on my part. There’s no basis for argument. But I can imagine the possibility that this was a silencing,” Reiji said while tapping his temple, which had to be a habit when he was thinking.

Mei gave him a sharp look.

“A silencing? What—what does that mean?!”

“Mei. Do you have a criminal record?”

“Huh? Of course I don’t.”

“So then there’d be no way for you to know. In this country, crimes outside of the Masquerade are investigated thoroughly.”

Preserving public safety was one of the most important roles of the nation.

Especially in this strictly regulated society, there was a demand for firm handling of any criminal acts that could shake the system, and the deterrence of developing crimes, investigations, and arrests were enforced with extreme prejudice.

“There’s the video from the surveillance cameras around a scene, facial recognition, their social media history. If a human with citizenship is the culprit, then it’s impossible to run around evading all of that. You will always be caught, and the methods this time were far too dangerous.”

“Yeah, of course it was dangerous; it was a bomb,” said Mei.

“That’s not what he means by dangerous.” Getsu didn’t even want to imagine. He continued with a disgusted expression like he’d tasted something bitter. “I dunno how it is if you’re living normally, but illegal possession of weapons outside the Masquerade is a real serious crime. Not just having bombs and their components, even planning to make one would get you arrested.”

“You mean even if you don’t do it?”

“Of course. And because of that, in this country, unlike other places, bomb terrorism is incredibly difficult to pull off. The scene will be investigated down to the nano level, and pieces of equipment and the remaining bomb components will all be analyzed.”

To get over those hurdles and carry out an act of terrorism, anti-government, antiestablishment organizations would need funds, technology, all sorts of support at a level that was impossible for an individual criminal.

“And that sort of outrageous group was after some criminal in the hospital and her family?” Reiji took over. “Rather than blowing up some high school girl who never even had a case properly assembled against her, there were any number of targets they would prioritize.”

It was strange—too strange.

“In other words, if there was a reason they were targeted, it would be related to the Mythic Tonic that the hit-and-run centaur was taking. It’s possible those sorts of terrorist organizations circulated the drug, and when they found out she was arrested, they silenced her.”

Such was Reiji’s deduction—but a different opinion came from somewhere unexpected.

“Even if those organizations do exist, the fact that they haven’t been arrested yet...” With a snap of his fingers, a man appeared cradling a bouquet of flowers. He wore a high-class jacket with a turtleneck, like a gentleman combining intellect and playfulness. “That in itself is strange. Though, I think your deductions are rather good.”

“Boss?!”

“Yup, it’s the boss. Wahoo! ♪”

His careless and flippant greeting clashed strangely with his handsome face, reminiscent of a foreign movie star.

But at a funeral, nobody laughed, so he stuck out, an unpleasant silence falling around them.

“Oh dear, no laughs? I wanted to break the tension, though.” Offering the flowers on the altar that was devoid of all notions of religion, the man then put his hands together and turned around.

“You thought that would work?!” Mei snapped at him. “The heck, old man, did you come just to piss me off?!”

“No, no. But you boys are right, an ordinary citizen who’s never broken the law couldn’t even begin to understand how dangerous the national power is in our controlled society. Well, to get to the point...

In this country, Akitsushima—

“In a society where social media tied to personal information is mandatory, in an era when trust is visualized as numbers—these days, society will expel any terrorists or people who have even the likelihood of committing a crime.”

That went for crime or otherwise disruptive behavior.

For many criminals, it was common to begin with a minor crime, which led to being rejected from society, and then their crimes would escalate.

The system would thoroughly nip all those in the bud. If they repeatedly committed minor crimes, and their credit decreased, they would be watched by public safety organizations and automatically observed by AI. And through close surveillance of their activity logs, they would even become subject to preventative arrest.

“In other words, they’ll be caught at the stage of preparation and planning, before committing a crime. If someone wanted to avoid this, they would have to live their life without using social media at all, outside of government services and societal infrastructure.”

“...No one can live decently like that, can they?” Mei imagined a life away from the system as she responded to the president of Fantastic Sweeper,

Narasaki. “If they can’t use credit payment, then they can’t pay their communications fees, their energy or utility bills... They can’t rent an apartment or even buy food unless they pay in cash. They’d live like a prehistoric cave dweller.”

“They would,” Narasaki replied. “It’s possible they could live in the wilderness going *ooga ooga*, but do you think people like that would go to the trouble of making a bomb and blow up a hospital in the big city?”

“There’s no way. They wouldn’t even be able to get on the train or bus, in the first place.”

They would be rejected by social media and facial recognition in transit—and just wind up arrested.

“That’s how it works. In our society, crime effectively can’t be committed. At the very least, it’s not likely that the perpetrator of terrorism would avoid arrest, or that the police wouldn’t find any clues, or that there was a lack of reporting at all.”

“...Now, this is starting to sound like a conspiracy theory. What, are you trying to say this is a cover-up?” Mei said jokingly, figuring that was absurd.

But Narasaki immediately affirmed her question.

“Exactly that. You get it.”

“Huh?!”

“There are a lot of people in power who would think that they don’t want to make the hit-and-run centaur incident into a societal problem, since it would inevitably put the Masquerade out of business, when it’s needed as a place to let off steam in a controlled society—even if it produces a lot of problems and deaths.”

“But even so, you mean that they killed her...and her whole family?!”

“That’s what I mean. I’m not saying that it’s correct, though.”

The murder of the accused. The erasure of the plaintiff to be prosecuted—and the arrest of terrorists who challenged social order.

“That’s the narrative that’s been set in motion. Most likely, in a few days,

people or groups with extreme views will be arrested, and they will be dealt with as the perpetrators of this terrorist incident.”

“False charges... That’s sickening, and it’s not a fundamental solution, is it?” Getsu cut in.

Narasaki gave a nasty chuckle.

“You think? They managed to eliminate an issue that would threaten national policy. While they’re at it, they can clean up some threatening elements. Isn’t that a fundamental solution? So long as you’re not worried about justice or morality.”

“Isn’t that what you should be most worried about?!”

“If it’s not found out, if there’s no proof—so long as there’s no record on social media, it’s all shrouded in darkness. It’s like it never happened. There’s no chance that you kids can overrule the credibility of the narrative the nation has spread.”

This was war in the modern era: a battle of ideas in the media.

Cognitive warfare. Spreading a story convenient to your own faction, staging legitimacy to gain support.

“This is what has developed out of the old advertisement battles and propaganda. Going up against the current administration, which has strengthened the national control system with their complete hold on social and traditional media, or the will of the public that supports them, is virtually impossible.”

“...Is this something we should be talking about here? This is government criticism, something we could get canceled for.”

In this society, “cancellation” had a far heavier meaning than what it did at the dawn of the internet era.

Opinions posted on social media would be inspected by AI, which was reflected in credit scores, and you would receive social and economic punishments. Getting canceled would mean literally canceling your own social position.

But Narasaki had a cold look on his face, smiling as Mei flinched.

“Oh dear, are you worried for me? You don’t have to worry; nobody else can hear our conversation here. Just understand that I’ve dealt with things.”

“Huh? What? There are no walls here; you can totally be heard.” Mei was skeptical.

“He can do it,” Reiji cut in. “The boss is a ridiculously sketchy man and it’s hard to explain in detail—but he can do stuff like that. You can be assured that the conversation here won’t get out, which is why I’ll say this, but…” This was the reason that he, a Brocken, did not like “reading the room”—an important aspect of this nation’s culture. “Unlike other countries, what restricts freedom in this nation is our own citizens’ ‘commons sense.’ If you see someone wearing no mask and talking loudly while spitting, what will you think, Mei?”

“Huh? You’ll think of him as a dirty old man, of course.”

“That’s the ‘common sense’ that society has determined. It wasn’t the nation that made wearing masks legally mandatory, but the citizens themselves. Fearing the risk of infection, they wished for it, got outraged about non-mask wearers on social media and punished them.”

He didn’t reject the idea of wearing a mask. That was incredibly important to prevent infection.

“This incident was not so different. The citizens want the culprits of these tragic incidents punished, so their will is reflected when some potential infractors are instantly judged—people who seem like they’d really do it, those who should meet a miserable fate. In ancient times, execution of criminals was a spectacle. Around the guillotine platform, they would distribute pamphlets that listed out a mixture of fact and fiction on the criminal’s motives and heinous methods—and even snack and treat stands set up shop.”

Narasaki laughed, adding to what Reiji had said.

“In the modern era, justice is pleasure. You bash whoever seems apt first and then slowly reveal the truth. I don’t think they’ll abandon the case. They’ll catch the real culprit, too, you know? If the culprit isn’t involved with the company, that is.”

“The company... That’s your parent company, right?” said Mei.

“Beast Tech—the general company that made such great strides since the pandemic. Frankly speaking, the foundation for this incident was their failure in allowing the dispersal of the Mythic Tonic. If Miss Mai Ikeda’s treatment had gone well and her testimony was disclosed, then wouldn’t they have been taken to task for their mismanagement?”

Mei did not fail to understand what his sophisticated suggestion meant.

“So then... You mean your parent company did this?! The bomb?!”

“The possibility isn’t zero, I suppose. The company’s influence reaches all over the country, mainly due to Monster Tonic and the crowd masks. They’re great at manipulating the political world, police, and social media disputes.”

“In-o-ther-words...” he said rhythmically. “The nation, citizens, our company—all the forces that govern this country, on the surface and behind the scenes, are working to use today’s funeral to resolve her death and the hit-and-run centaur incident caused by the Mythic Tonic leak.”

“So then I should just give up...? Don’t give me that crap, old man!!” Mei glared sharply at Narasaki.

He waved his hand to indicate no.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I mean that, in other words, you can’t pursue this case through legitimate means.”

“Stop beating around the bush. Get to the point,” said Reiji.

“Yeah, yeah, Boss,” Getsu joined in. “It’s because you always blab on so long that people actually don’t like you.”

Narasaki seemed surprised to have both of his employees attacking him.

“Huh? Is that true? People don’t like me?! I thought I was a beloved boss!”

“...You’re delusional. Who let it get this bad?” said Reiji.

“You should go to the hospital, Boss. Or raise our salaries,” said Getsu.

“I’d like you to thank me just for paying you properly every month, in this economy. Though, it’s not much.”

“I don’t need to hear your complaints,” Mei cut in. “Is there some other way to pursue this case?!”

If she couldn’t pursue it through legitimate means...

Then that meant she could pursue it through illegitimate means. Narasaki had been implying that.

“It can’t be outside police or detectives. But our job as Fantastic Sweeper is crime prevention, public safety, and street cleaning in the Masquerade. Plus, identifying the procurement channels and investigating victims of the extremely dangerous Mythic Tonic.”

“That’d be impressive. If your parent company weren’t the mastermind.”

“Oh, how can you say that? That could never be the case! We loyal dogs have to work to prove the innocence of our parent company. But oh no, we don’t have the funds!” Narasaki spun around like an actor under a spotlight. “Ah! If only we had the budget! Then we would investigate! What a tragedy!”

“...So I should pay you? You’re saying you’d actually look into your filthy parent company, even if they’re the mastermind, and go through the correct procedures to corner them for me. I’m supposed to believe that?”

“Proving the innocence of our parent company is our job. And it would be sad if something seriously dangerous were to come up, but in that case, whatever higher-ranked people were involved in the cover-up would take responsibility and some posts would open up.”

It was a nasty, corrupt thing to say.

“Depending on where you take the conversation, this could be a major profit for me and Fantastic Sweeper. No matter what fuss is made about this incident, it will be impossible to stamp it out. To truly bring down the perpetrator means the country goes down with it.”

“...So whoever gave instructions for the cover-up will be kicked out?” With sharp eyes and a determined expression, Mei stood up against that ugliness.

“I’ll just say that there’s a possibility. Since the satisfaction level of our company’s customers isn’t that high.”

“That’s not something you should say proudly, Boss...,” Getsu cut in, grumbling.

Ignoring him, Mei searched the pocket of her mourning attire.

“That’s just fine with me. I’ll pay.”

“We’re not so cheap as to work for a high school girl’s allowance—,” he started to say, and then...

“How about two hundred million?” She thrust out her phone displaying the savings sum in her banking app.

“Give the investigation all you’ve got, gentlemen!” Narasaki said, doing a one-eighty.

“Whoa?!”

“You’re way too slick, old man!” Getsu cried. “How can you change your mind instantly?!”

“I thought we were cheap...,” said Reiji. “And wait, Mei, where did you get all that money?”

“Don’t underestimate an elite track athlete. That’s the insurance money, settlement, and other stuff I wrung out of that asshole who hit me.”

One person’s life. The price for her right leg—and her future as an athlete.

She thrust all of it at them, offering it without hesitation.

“I’ll give you all of it, so as an official request: Search for who is handing out that Mythic Tonic and the trash who killed my junior and her family. They’ve got to be out there—in that town or somewhere in your company!”

“Is that okay?” Getsu asked. “That’s important money... You won’t be struggling to live in the future?”

“It doesn’t matter. My parents are rich.”

“I’m speechless!!” Having the wealth gap between them thrust in his face, Getsu was unable to protest any further.

Narasaki clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Now, then. Since we have a client, this is legitimate work, my gentlemen
Specials!”

Having successfully acquired a client, his aristocratic face was twisted in a vulgar smirk.

“According to the information I’ve gotten from sources we can trust, there were four samples of the Tonic still in development that were stolen—and they were the pure, undiluted solution. It seems that this hit-and-run centaur incident was most likely one of those.”

“Meaning there are three more?! Seriously, there’s that many?!”

“Seriously. Mythic Beasts are fundamentally not something to fit in the vessel of a human. Take it carelessly, and one immediately loses control, and the sense of omnipotence it grants will cause major tragedies!” He did a tap dance as if he was excited, the heels of his brand-name leather shoes tap-tapping along. “We prevent that, and while we’re protecting the safety of this town, we reveal their plot. What a great job this is!”

“...He’s completely conned you.” Ignoring his boss making a dramatic pose, Reiji said to Mei, “The boss plans to milk funds and benefit both from you and the company. If you’re going to stop, then now is the time.”

“Hmph.” Mei seemed to want to say, *So what?* “How much will Reiji and Getsu get of my two hundred million?” she asked Narasaki.

“Zero. Since the company is paying them!”

“...At least give them half, one hundred million. It’s a reward for success; that’ll motivate them, right?”

“Seriously?!”

Hearing that, the poor boys froze with a literal creak.

“A-a hundred million...dude. How much is that and what can we buy, Reiji?!”

As Getsu was getting himself worked up and pulling his sleeve, Reiji said, “Calm down, it’s just one hundred million. Don’t panic—a hundred million... Anyway, we can get extra-large portions at Matsunoya, with egg, and replace our beds so there are no springs sticking out of them.”

“For real?! W-we’ll be rich...! Wow!!”

“And not beds from Ikua. From Buji. With new sheets and a mattress pad.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!! Now that’ll really get us motivated, partner!!”

“Yeah... It’s not bad.”

As the two of them were exposing their low standard of living, Mei glared at their employer.

“How about you raise their pay a little? Your employees are ridiculously poor.”

“That remark does hit home, as a boss.” With a thin smile like it didn’t pain him at all, Narasaki looked around the area and made the finishing remark. “All right, then. The client has contracted Fantastic Sweeper for two hundred million. We’ll sign the contract later for a formal document, but for now, please transfer half the money as a deposit, one hundred million yen.”

“You’re overcharging, Boss...,” Getsu said. “A hundred million when you haven’t done anything yet?”

“You can say anything with a verbal promise, after all. I want to see that she’s really prepared for this.” While he was smiling, the boss revealed an expression that was sharp—serious and guarded. “This is legitimate business. Isn’t it obvious I should do this, as the employer who is paying you two?”

“If you’re trying to test me, don’t bother. This is just numbers; I don’t care about it.” Mei tapped at her phone without hesitation, getting straight to it.

She made a bank payment from her own account to the account Narasaki instructed—nine digits all in a row.

“Transfer complete. Do a proper job. If you slack off, I’ll make you regret it.”

“Ohhh, scary, scary. But it’s amazing that you made such a quick decision and took action so decisively. All right, then we have an agreement!”

Pulling out his own phone, he checked the balance, then with a smile like a magician being showered with applause, Narasaki clapped and turned back to his employees.

“Our business stipulates the investigation and identification of the culprit of the Mythic Tonic leak incident, the bombing of the perpetrator, and appropriate ‘disposal.’ Once the mission is accomplished, half the reward—one hundred million—is your joint share.”

“...A—a hundred million. Dude... It doesn’t feel real, that number.” Getsu’s eyes were wide.

Reiji, on the other hand, maintained some calm as he hammered out the details.

“What about expenses? I want you to decide how it will be dealt with when funds are needed for investigation.”

“As investigation expenses, I’ll allot half of the deposit, fifty million. So long as you submit receipts to my secretary, Neru, you may use that freely. I’ll calculate it so that amount is subtracted half from the company and half from your reward.”

“In other words...if we use all the funds, then we and the company get seventy-five million?”

“That’s right. Well, it will be somewhat less than that, what with income tax and other annoying processing fees, but I’ll arrange for a large sum of money to go into your pockets. At the very least, you can earn far more than for normal duties at our company.”

The Specials’ eyes lit up.

It was born out of emotion, righteous indignation, just cause, and profit granted.

And it poured fuel on the desires of these monsters living in a capitalist society. The two of them calmly nodded.

“Understood. We will take this job.”

— 01 Mini Suspicion —

It was the day after the funeral for Mai Ikeda, the hit-and-run centaur and first-year at Akanebara Municipal High School, and her parents.

“So? You’ll be starting the investigation right away, I assume. I *am* paying you.”

“Leave it to us.”

They were in the classroom after school.

Beside Mei’s wheelchair were Reiji, standing with his back to the window that reflected the blue sky, and Getsu, who was sitting with a slovenly hunch.

As the three began to discuss their plans moving forward, the other students hastily left the room.

“Hey... Are they avoiding us?” said Getsu.

“It’s your bad manners,” said Mei. “That’s how delinquents would sit in old TV dramas.”

“Yeah, maybe, but...there’s no chair. It’d be bad to borrow someone else’s chair, right?”

“Then you just have to stand.”

“You can’t say that when you got the best position at the window for yourself! You’re so mean! SO mean!” Getsu whined.

Reiji wasn’t bothered by it, continuing their previous conversation.

“We investigate the channel through which the Mythic Tonic was acquired.”

It was a straightforward plan.

“The company is going so far as to silence people involved to stop it from turning into a lawsuit because they’d be in trouble if it were probed too deeply. So then we should just do what they don’t want, and be thorough about it.”

“You’re a nasty one, too,” said Mei. “Oh yeah, and have you investigated

Mai’s house and stuff?”



“Right after she was arrested. There were no notable clues, but Mai Ikeda’s private belongings were discovered in a locker in Natsukibara station. Along with a change of clothes and her textbooks, we seized what was left of her Mythic Tonic.”

He presented a few photos that had been printed out. Narasaki getting carried away and making a peace sign. Behind him in the photo on the heavy desk were a uniform and underwear lined up perfectly, and in the middle was a plastic bottle.

“This...? It looks so bland. I thought it’d be sketchier.”

“The process to produce it is fantastical, but it *is* a manufactured product.”

The plastic bottle was a vial with a rubber stopper, filled with a drug for injection.

If you thrust a needle into the stopper, drew out the drug and injected it, then it would instantly be effective.

“There were also unused syringes and needles, but they’re mass-produced articles, so it would be difficult to trace them to their source.”

“...So instruments like these can be acquired easily? I could never inject myself.”

“Technology has advanced for syringes, too. They’re easy for even amateurs to use.”

The needle was extremely thin, inflicting hardly any pain or bleeding, and could be used after receiving a simple explanation.

“Since the Mythic Tonic isn’t a proper drug, you don’t have to inject it into a vein. Worst case, even if you swallow it, it will have some effect. You just stick it into your skin wherever, so it’s easy.”

“You know a lot about it. It seems you have experience.”

“The stuff I deal with every day is pretty similar. In work and in my private life.”

“Sounds dangerous. Maybe it’s weird of me to say this since I hired you, but

you two are pretty sketchy, aren't you?" Mei seemed irritated.

Reiji chuckled.

"Would you prefer some warriors of light who fight fair and square, Sponsor?"

"If it can hit whatever jackasses come to start a fight, I'll take a nail bat or a sword of light."

"That's so mean. Are we the nail bat?" Getsu whined.

"A nail bat costing a hundred million. We have to prove we're worth that."

"...True. If you're paying that much, then I'd expect some fully automatic whacking functionality outta us, at least."

"That's on us. Mei doesn't have to do anything. We're the ones doing this. We'll show that we'll do what we were paid for—and more."

I guess this is what you call work mode.

Right now, Reiji had none of his emotional attitude from when he'd first met Mei. He was like the centaur-hunter she'd seen that night— With the ruthlessness of a monster who hunted monsters.

Shivering with a ghastly feeling, Mei cut in.

"So what are you going to do, specifically?"

"We'll trace the activity of the hit-and-run centaur, aka Mai Ikeda. Her typical behavior, her activity in the Masquerade, people she came in contact with. Somewhere along the line, we should find her connection to the mastermind who gave her the Tonic."

"Hey, Mei. Your accident was last winter, right?"

Getsu's question seemed sudden, and feeling like it was tracing an old wound, Mei expressed her displeasure.

"Yeah, does that have anything to do with it?"

"It really might. Ikeda's motive... At the very least, the initial trigger was the senior she admired getting into an unfortunate accident or wanting revenge against the hit-and-run culprit. We're assuming that right outta the gate, yes?"

“...Yes. I don’t think that was a lie. Some people are simply idiots with no brakes when it comes to violence...” The type who would attack others without hesitation in their home, in their daily lives, with fists, with words, with power. “But she wasn’t like that. She wouldn’t have killed a bug without a reason,” Mei insisted.

As far as Mei knew, Mai Ikeda had no violent tendencies.

That was why even after seeing all the proof, she hadn’t been certain until she’d witnessed her friend’s acts of violence herself.

“What sort of person was Ikeda?” asked Reiji.

“I guess you’d call her introverted. A loner and a kind of gloomy person.” Mei weakly closed her eyes, remembering. “But...we got along. You know, I’m a mean person, right?”

“That’s for sure.”

“Defend me a little, come on... Well, she really respected me, as nasty as I am. She called me fast and strong, and cool. It was like she saw me as an idol she admired.”

A glass sculpture made of respect and love.

But shatter it, and it would never return.

“After I was hit by that car, when she came to visit me in the hospital, she was always crying. She bawled enough for my part, not being able to run anymore, and saying seriously that she wanted to kill the culprit.”

“So why wouldn’t she aim directly for the hit-and-run criminal, even when she got ahold of the Mythic Tonic?” asked Reiji.

“Because I never told her who it was. Yeah, of course I know their name and address, but I thought if I relayed that info to her, that dumbass would seriously go kill him, so I never did.”

“And she had no connections to look into it herself?”

“You think if I had told her, the hit-and-run bastard would have been the only one killed? ...Ah.” Mei pressed her lips tight as if she had been hurt by her own words. “Sorry, I said something stupid.”

“...Yeah.”

If she had revealed the identity, then maybe the hit-and-run centaur would have directly targeted someone and killed them.

And if that were the case, then it would be what Mei wanted—an indirect murder, using her friend.

“I do think he’s trash who should drop dead, but I’m not going to kill him. If I did that, then I’d be trash, too.”

“True enough.” But Reiji muttered as if cushioning his statement first, then continued, “The accident that caused this was during winter last year. It’s been a long time since then.”

People’s tempers would cool.

The blazing heat of revenge would eventually wane and burn low.

“But she committed the crime anyway. Frankly, it feels too late to bother. Something happened, in the time between the accident until now, enough of an impetus to carry out her revenge.”

“...You mean the Mythic Tonic?” Getsu asked.

“Most likely.” Reiji nodded. “If we investigate Mai Ikeda’s whereabouts and the people she came into contact with these past few months, and where she stopped by in the Masquerade, I think the odds are good that we can learn some kind of clue.”

Reiji pushed away from the windowsill he’d been leaning against, then went to the entrance of the classroom, opening the semiautomatic contactless doors, with the two of them following behind.

“Where are you going?” Mei asked.

“The track club. It’s your old haunt, and if Mai Ikeda was the introverted person she seemed to be, then it would have been easier for her to build relationships with club members, who she had something in common with, rather than her classmates. They might have some recent information on her.”

“You’re surprisingly smart.”

“My score on the entrance exam was better than Getsu’s.”

“Just a little!” Getsu protested. “By about three points! That’s not a huge difference!”

Walking ahead and behind the wheelchair, they escorted her.

They fell in line with Reiji in front, Mei squeaking her wheels along in the middle, and Getsu taking up the rear.

Their strange group was like a party in a classic video game, drawing weird looks from passing students.

“Have you shown your face at the track club recently?” asked Reiji.

“No. The other day, I just went to go grab some of my things I left in the locker there.”

“Was that when you found that evidence?”

Mei had initially gotten involved in the incident when she’d discovered the bloody socks and other articles Mai left behind.

“So then if we can investigate Mai Ikeda’s locker, too, something might come up.”

“You’re not planning to rummage through her underwear, I hope. That stuff just stinks.”

“I know. I went the other day. There wasn’t really anything then, though,” Getsu suddenly let slip.

Mei turned her head to glare at him.

“What?! What the heck—rummaging around a girl’s locker without permission; I’ll report you!”

“It was for the investigation! Of the students in the club at this school. We figured out that much from witness testimony at the scene, so on the day we transferred in, I went looking into all the clubroom lockers and stuff.” Getsu lightly poked his own nose. “With this. Mai threw away the bloody socks and stuff you found, right? That smell stuck around in the locker, and while searching, I noticed that her shoebox and indoor shoes and stuff stank, too.”

“You’re a dog sniffing weird things...like some kind of freak.”

“Can you stop looking at me like I’m a terrible person?! It’s for work! Work! Right, Reiji?!” Getsu tried to justify himself as Mei shot him a glare.

Meanwhile, Reiji seemed unconcerned.

“...It’s hard to defend you. Even if it’s work, you’re still clearly sniffing a girl’s body odor.”

“Ah, you’re so mean! Don’t betray me!”

“So then there was no new information on Mai Ikeda?” Reiji asked.

“Just what I heard from getting in touch with my club friends after finding the bloody socks,” said Mei. “She’d been skipping school lately, and after school especially, she’d hardly come to practice at all. And then...” A hint arrived around the time she had stopped coming to the club. “A friend from the track team told me she’d seen Mai at Natsukibara. I figured that dimwit was doing something dangerous, so I went to look for her that day.”

“And then you ran into *that*... I guess you were lucky?” said Reiji.

“I don’t think nearly getting crushed counts as lucky.”

While continuing their conversation, the three of them left the school building.

They went out into the school courtyard, lit by the afternoon sun. The real practice must not have been happening yet, as track club members in sportswear seemed to be just starting their warm-ups.

“Why’re you guys so quiet?” Mei asked the boys. “Why don’t you get talking to someone?”

“Uh. Wait, I’m trying to prepare myself,” said Reiji.

“Yeah. It’s like, you gotta find the right moment to get a good reception, right?” Getsu added.

The two of them hid from view and watched the track club members.

Seeing them totally getting cold feet, Mei said, “Are you socially inept, or what? You guys are such losers.”

“Naw, we just don’t have experience...,” said Getsu. “It’s scary, you know? I mean, I’ll actually be sad if they won’t talk to us.”

“Yeah, we should prepare before trying this,” said Reiji. “Getsu, you play the track club member.”

“Huh...? Okay, got it. Then I’m a track club member! Um...what do they do in track?”

“They run. But before that, I’ll talk to you. Wait a second, I’m going to establish a script now.”

“...Hey.” Having watched this with utter exasperation, Mei glared at the two of them as they started putting on a little skit with complete seriousness. “Cut it out, you dumbasses. You can just be normal for this. Normal.”

“We’re doing this because we don’t know what normal is,” Reiji pointed out.

“Yeah!” Getsu agreed. “Um, if I’m a normal person, and Reiji were to suddenly talk to me... I’d just call the cops, right? Like, *Help me, officer!*”

“I completely agree, but that won’t get us anywhere,” said Reiji. “...We should think of a way to avoid getting reported to the police. You can’t think of anything? Like riding a bicycle naked or playing the piano with your crotch.”

“Those are all comic nude acts... Is that your sense of humor?” Mei shot back, disbelief and irritation on her face, and then pushed forward with her wheelchair. “I’ll talk to them. You two follow me.”

“Woo! Thanks, for real!”

“That helps a lot. Thanks.”

“...I feel like you’re thanking me as seriously as when I said I was giving you a hundred million. What’s up with that?”

It would be one thing if they were joking about it, but the real hopeless thing was how genuine she could tell they were.

This pair, the two Specials, were shockingly ignorant of the ways of the world. Maybe that was because they had adapted specifically to the environment of the Masquerade, but Mei felt that, even more than that, they were lacking in simple social experience.

When she approached some club members warming up, they called out to her.

“Mei...?! It’s been so long! Thanks for coming!”

“Sup. Just you guys today?”

A girl with a sort of classless air who seemed to be their leader bowed her head in greeting. There were a number of other club members, but they just glanced at Mei and the pair behind her and didn’t try to approach.

“...Are people keeping away from you, Mei?” asked Getsu.

“Ever since entering the school, I was the fastest—faster even than the second-and third-years. I was the best.”

“So it’s hierarchy-based on speed... Exactly what you’d expect from the track club; the fast ones are the most important.”

“Basically. In other words, I’m a total nobody now, so you don’t have to worry about it,” Mei replied to Getsu and Reiji, then turned back to the girl who had bowed her head so energetically.

She shook her unruly short haircut. “You’re really scary, so I won’t do what they did! Thanks!”

“I feel like there’s some other factor here bigger than speed, with that response. Like something violent.”

“Don’t worry about it. So, you guys. Why didn’t you come to Mai’s funeral?”

Her direct accusation made the track club girls grimace with a start.

“I mean, since the place where she died was where it was...”

“The club adviser told us not to go,” said the girl with the short haircut. “Since it was misconduct, if things got blown up, then the whole track team might not be able to go to the tournament. So like, just offer sympathies online, or something.”

“That’s pretty cold. You were on the same team,” Reiji said, less like an accusation and more like he was confused. “Weren’t you friends? I thought for sure that these sorts of club groups would all be close friends.”

“...I think that type of thing is only in manga.”

“Oh really...? That’s too bad. I’ve learned something else about normalcy.”
Reiji looked somewhat dejected.

One track club girl eyed him dubiously.

“You’re a strange guy. You’re not...Mei’s boyfriend, are you?!”

“Of course not. He’s a friend I’m hanging out with lately.” She put a hand to her chin and considered this awhile. “They have reasons for knowing a lot about the Masquerade. I’ve asked them to investigate the reason for Mai’s death, what caused it, that kind of stuff. There’s no way I could just leave it at that.”

“Your evaluation will take a hit if that gets found out...!”

“Bring it on. My family is rich, and even if my credit score winds up at rock bottom, I’m not gonna die. I’m not so mature that I can brush it off when my friend got blown up.”

It was a type of arrogance. She had nothing to lose, and even if she did lose it, she could bear it.

Hearing that certainty in Mei’s words, the track club girl bit her lip awkwardly.

“...Not everyone is like you...”

“Huh? I’m normal.”

“...Yeah, nooo,” said Getsu.

“Yeah. We don’t know much about society, but you’re definitely not normal,”
Reiji added.

“Shut it! Whose side are you on?!” Mei snapped, refusing to be bothered by Reiji and Getsu’s teasing or about the track club girl, who seemed uncomfortable.

She wasn’t serious; it was almost like a lighthearted comeback. The track club members had to understand that, as the situation didn’t grow tense—rather, people gave the fishy duo sympathetic looks.

“You’re the students who transferred in recently, right? We can’t talk about personal stuff with outsiders,” said the track club girl.

“You don’t have to get that deep into it,” Reiji told her. “How she’s been lately, where she’s been, who she met...that kind of thing is enough. We’ll investigate the details.”

“Huh... That’s just like a detective.”

“Too bad we’re cleaners. Though it’s similar enough.”

As the track club girl seemed like she’d relaxed her guard a bit, Reiji stepped back slightly before pulling aside his mask.

He revealed his face: black-and-white hair, eyes sharp like a katana, and a crisp silhouette. The club girls all broke into murmurs.

“...I—I won’t be tricked into this just ‘cause you’re cute! Can I get a photo later, though?!”

“Ah, no fair! I—I want one, too!”

“Sorry, but no. Having lots of people know my face won’t benefit me,” Reiji said quietly, then he gave the track club girls a fixed look and put on the pressure. “I think Mei has lost it. But...she’s angry about her friend—her junior’s—absurd death, and she’s trying to expose whatever injustice might be behind it. I can’t say the details, but there’s a lot of money on the line.”

She would make sacrifices. She would pay out of her own pocket. That was proof of her determination.

“If you care for your friend even a little, then help her out. Please.”

“If you put it that way, it’s hard to say no. So then...let’s have an honest competition!” The lead track club girl pointed her finger at Reiji, challenging him. “Just one race—the hundred meter. If we win, then we’re getting a photo of you, mister cutie!”

“...Then would you also provide no information?”

“No, I’ll talk. If you win, then no photo, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Is there even a point to racing, then...?”

“She just wants to save a pic of a cute guy on her phone. They can never get guys since they’re all lady gorillas.”

“Hey, quiet, Mei! So how about it, will you take on the challenge?!”

The club members all got excited. With them cheering on the track club girl who had made the challenge...

“Fine. I’ll do it,” Reiji told her quietly, and he went to his mark.

*

The cheers of the track club girls and their friends all ended in an instant.

“So slow!! You’re slow enough it freaks me out!!”

“What the heck was that tough act for?! You’re at mealworm level, Reiji!!”

“Haah, haah, haah...!”

The hundred-meter dash. The track club girls’ representative had scored eleven seconds.

Reiji Kasumi scored about fourteen seconds. There was no need for a ruling—his brutal defeat was clear.

“It was just by a hair.” As Reiji’s shoulders slumped and sweat beaded on his forehead, Mei lowered her voice and batted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t lie... Weren’t you flying in the sky the other day? Why did you lose?”

“Because I took the Human Tonic this morning. While I’m on it...for another hour at least, I’m just a human.”

“No, that was less than normal. How can you be so out of shape, with that face...?” Mei was fed up.

As promised, the girls took photos of Reiji’s sweaty face with their phones.

“That’s so disappointing, when he’s that handsome...”

“Cute...and out of shape...a cute potato...”

The girls pierced Reiji with looks as he wiped his dripping sweat with a handkerchief.

Then the exasperated Mei tapped on her phone to display some characters, which she thrust in front of his face.

“By the way, how are you with your studies? Can you read this?”

She was showing him the characters for “rose”—basically something a middle schooler could read.

“...Bracken?”

“Don’t play stupid in such a subtle way! You sound for real; it’s scary...”

“It has the top radical for grass, so I deduced that it was the name of a plant. Is that much right?”

“You *are* for real!!”

Shock and bursts of laughter.

They were synchronized like a comic duo, inviting laughter, and the track club girls were laughing their heads off.

“Pf...heh-heh-heh-heh... N-not bad! I wasn’t expecting that kind of humor...!”

“I’m serious, though.”

“Nah, come on, come on. That transfer student’s a pretty funny guy, huh, Mei?”

“Yeah, he is,” Getsu said.

His words were curt. But Mei didn’t miss Getsu’s expression, which was rather troubled.

She reached out forcefully, grabbed him by the collar, and whispered in his ear. “It seems like they think that was a joke... But that was for real, wasn’t it? Are you guys stupid?”

“We never got any compulsory education. We deserve some recognition for getting accepted to high school purely on self-study, okay!”

Regardless of their abilities, if they had no chance to get an education, then there was nothing they could do.

That was a major problem for this pair who, as Specials, had been treated as second-class citizens.

“We studied at the care home, but the textbooks were super old, and it was all over the place from elementary through middle school. There was no teacher, so we just searched the net and watched lesson videos. Frankly,

there's a lot of stuff we don't know."

"If you got into high school like that, doesn't that actually mean you're smart?"

It was clear they were intelligent. Honestly, if Mei had been in their exact circumstances, she wasn't sure she could do the same.

But that aside.

"All right! Then next, you race with me!" cried Getsu. "I'll get revenge for my partner!"

"Huh...? Um, sure, but we don't need a photo of you."

"Hey, it's not like I wanted you to take one! I've just gotta show you a bit of what we can do, or saying we're doing an investigation isn't going to be convincing. If I win, it'll be great if you can tell me about stuff."

"All right. Then I accept!"

The track club girl stood at the starting line once more. She readied herself with a crouching start, while by contrast, Getsu cracked his neck as he stood there like you would for a kids' race.

Frankly, it was obvious he was an amateur. Thinking about it normally, even with his advantage as a boy, there was no reason he would beat the track club girl. Mei was anticipating that the girl would win by a large margin when...

"Getcha's gonna win, isn't he?" she asked Reiji when he came back, sure that her hunch would be off.

"You call me Reiji, but he gets a cute nickname? It makes you sound really close."

"It's easier to say. It sounds like 'get a chance'; it's lucky."

"Is that how it works? I don't know; he's an amateur at running, too. He might lose," Reiji said with a cool look.

Leaning her cheek on her hand, elbow on the armrest of her wheelchair, Mei looked up at him. "You're a bad liar."

"Yup."

The starting signal rang. The track girl bounded off the ground in an amazing start.

She leaped out. But a gust of wind blew right past her, messing up her unruly bangs.

“...Huhhhhhh?!”

“So fast! A yellow meteor?!”

His ordinary sneakers, not even designed for sports, dug into the earth. He had a strange way of running on his tiptoes, but he was so fast he was practically teleporting, overtaking the track girl to immediately dash by the hundred-meter line.

“Guess that’ll do it. I won, right?”

“Wh-what was his time?! How many seconds was that? Please join the team right now, right this minute!! That’s an insane record! A world first! You can go to the Olympics! Gold medal!”

“No, sorry, I can’t do that.”

Getsu stopped with the track girls looking at him in admiration.

He wasn’t sweating at all, just scratching his cheek awkwardly as he turned around.

“That’s only for humans, right? Neither he nor I can participate.”

He said with a genuine smile.

*

Reiji was now recognized as cute but disappointing, his stock with the track club girls in freefall but nevertheless stabilized.

His face aside, Getsu was superfast—his stock with the track girls was rising at a record rate.

Getsu was desperately restraining his smirk at getting this attention from girls, but since work was the priority, he resumed their questioning.

“Our school has a program for scholarship students...” The track club girl’s testimony began.

“Oh, I know about that,” said Getsu. “The one where the subsidy exempts you from tuition, food, rent, and stuff?”

“You know about it, huh?”

“I looked into it before, wondering if I could apply for it. I gave up since it was hard as hell to get it, though.”

They were discussing rumors. The cute boy and blond-haired delinquent stood next to the track club girl.

While glancing back and forth between the two of them, the track club girl continued.

“Yeah, that’s it. They treat you real well, but it’s so brutal, if your grades fall, you’re immediately expelled... They say your credit score on social media has to be crazy high or you won’t get in.”

“So then what about these scholarship students? Mai Ikeda wasn’t one of them, was she?”

“She wasn’t. But lately there’s been some weird rumors about a scholarship student at our school.”

Even now, in an era where social credit was tied to social media.

In places where unspecified large numbers would congregate, so long as people were making connections, the negative side of that was unavoidable.

“The rumors that she’s mini-ing...”

“What’s that?”

“It’s short for mini-job. Um, it’s not actual sex, but where you just let someone touch your boobs and butt and stuff. You meet on social media and get an allowance...”

“...What?!” Getsu cried out in shock. Reiji was also frowning with displeasure.

“Is she seriously doing that, in this day and age? Not on the deep web, but on social media?! She’s gonna get found out!” said Mei.

“Girls who are scared of their credit score dropping will never do it, but there are always those sorts of like...burnouts, girls whose scores were low to begin

with, so apparently, they do that.

“...I dunno the details, but these are ultimately just rumors.” The track girl went on like that, hesitantly. “So then a few times, a little before Mai stopped coming to the club, I saw her and the scholarship student together.

“They were on the train, even though their homes were in different directions.

“Someone I know saw them get off at Natsukibara...at the station in *that town*.

“Rumors started going around that it was strange. But nobody could stop them... I’m sorry. I’m sorry...! I never thought something like that would happen...!” By the end, she was in tears. The track club girl’s emotions overflowed, and she choked on her words.

About ten minutes after hearing that from her—

Reiji Kasumi called out to the girl who was walking around a corner of the hallway in the school building after school.

“Are you the scholarship student who’ll let people do you?”

“That’s shockingly rude.”

Her hair was quite long and a glossy jet-black.

Her big, almond-shaped eyes were intense as she gazed with suspicion at the black-and-white-haired boy who had suddenly shown up in front of her.

On the flip phone in Reiji’s hand was a screenshot of her social media profile.

Citizen registration number XXXXXX Kyoto Akanebara Municipal High School, class 2-C.

Kei Kakiba, achievement and penalty record: none.

Age 16, birthday Dec 24, hobby: reading.

Top grades in the entrance exams, representative for new students.

Relatives/dependents: no parents. Recognized lifestyle support/social support level: B

With no family to rely on—and excellent grades and credit score.

That alone was enough to determine she was no ordinary person, but actually standing in front of her...

She doesn't at all seem like someone who would get involved in a shady part-time job.

What with her refined and tall posture and her unwavering glare.

People who are up to something will generally feel some kind of guilt.

That was why they would get excessively defensive or react oversensitively to stimulation. That was a reflexive pattern of behavior that came about precisely because they privately understood the danger and criminality in what they were doing.

But this pure, impoverished, pretty, and intelligent-looking girl, a so-called beauty and brains...didn't have that.

"So you're not getting angry. I came here ready to get slapped," he inquired, probing.

"You're the third one today, after all. My hand hurts," Kei said abruptly.

"So you hit the other two..."

Then she started miming it with her left hand. "I could probably do it with my left."

"You don't have to try it out."

Something about them was off, which oddly put them on the same wavelength.

Behind the pair of them as they glared at one another in the hallway after school, hiding around the corner of the hall...

"...Did we pick the wrong person? Reiji's communication skills are worse than I thought," Mei said.

"Well, yeah," Getsu, holding her wheelchair handles, agreed.

They were watching nearby from their hiding spot as Reiji went to question Kei Kakiba, the person who had made contact with the hit-and-run centaur, aka

Mai Ikeda.

“If I were to go talk to her using that same line as Reiji did at first, it wouldn’t be funny,” Getsu pointed out.

“She’d call the cops on you.”

“Don’t say that to me without even hesitating, it’s actually depressing... I mean, I know I’m not a polished guy.”

Between his blond hair and his overall vibe, he looked like a delinquent, even though anyone would know right away he was a good guy if they tried talking to him.

So they had attempted solo contact with Reiji, thinking he could achieve a milder sort of contact than Getsu.

“A thousand yen on him getting socked,” said Mei.

“Oh, I wanna bet on that side, too, though.”

“That’s not worth betting against.”

So figured the pair of onlookers, anticipating that Reiji would get whacked and negotiation would break down.

They waited awhile for that moment, but...

“...Are they actually having a conversation?”

“No way. Is there a girl on this planet who would fall for that shitty attempt to pick her up?!”

Just far enough away that they couldn’t hear what they were talking about, the pair leaned forward.

“Perfect grades, perfect conduct, brains, and beauty. The top student with the best grades on the entrance exam... That’s the girl I heard would give ‘mini-jobs’ if asked,” said Reiji.

An email sent to his antique-esque flip phone had included the analysis of social media logs done at Fantastic Sweeper. They had searched through pertinent public information, and the investigative attempt had generated some results.

“It’s apparently a rumor among the first-and second-years here at Akanebara, mainly the boys. It’s being spread around the deep web school underground website—or in direct messages on social media. Having false rumors circulate on public social media would decrease your credit score, since it’s tied to your personal information. You must have been afraid of that—of the teen boys’ mean, petty, dirty stories.”

“ ... ”

Kei Kakiba considered this awhile before making a circle with her index finger and thumb.

“Would suing make me money?” she said, giving the classic hand sign for money.

“Either the legal fees make it a wash or you lose money, I think,” Reiji answered bluntly.

She didn’t seem to be that disappointed, softly giggling.

“I see. So there’s nothing good for me here, then.”

“I think it’s more profitable to sue after there’s been some real harm, but you should avoid that.”

“Oh my. Are you concerned, mister transfer student?”

So she knows? Reiji thought, eyebrows lifting just slightly.

“You’re giving me a look like, ‘How do you know?’ You’re famous. The mysterious loner transfer student who refuses to blend in with the class. You’ve popped up a few times lately on my social media timeline.”

“...Oh really?”

“Yes. Just a while ago, a girl from the track club shared something. You’re a slow runner, huh?”

“It was a close race... Social media is a nasty culture, after all. There’s nothing good about it.” He looked put out.

Kei pulled her phone out of her pocket.

It showed her social media. She swiped to refresh her timeline, and after a

quick look at it, she said, “So then you came here after hearing that rumor? You must have a high sex drive.”

“No. I’ve already looked into it enough to know you haven’t done it.”

“That sounds scary, too. Are you a stalker?”

“Not me, I asked someone at the office where I work. Because I don’t have social media.”

“What I’m hearing now is even worse. That poor office worker.”

“...I can’t really argue with that, but do listen to my explanation.” Looking embarrassed, Reiji operated his flip phone. “I searched the logs on your social media. What they’re generally calling mini-jobs—the template sentence structure is as follows: ‘Seeking mini, nopro F1 cond F0.5,’ declaring the service content and price.”

“That’s information I really didn’t need to know.”

The rate was determined with F0.1 equaling about one thousand yen.

A private business that sells youth and sex, said to be the oldest business in the world.

“That’s like explaining the underside of a bug; I didn’t need to hear that. Is this sexual harassment?”

“I don’t want to do it, either. Anyway, we searched for those sorts of texts from your logs, but there were zero hits. At the very least, you were not searching for clients on social media.”

“Are you the type to try to make sure you’re the first boyfriend of a girl you’re dating?”

“I’m not, but thank you for speaking euphemistically there. The dirtier way of saying that would have hurt me.”

“Are you obsessed with virgins?”

“...You’ve just destroyed the point of me thanking you.”

“I wanted you to experience at least some of the discomfort of having sexual topics suddenly brought up by a guy you’ve never met before.”

“...That’s a very unpleasant way to treat someone... Though, it is a reasonable way to retaliate.”

The screws were a little loose for a conversation between a boy and a girl, standing in the middle of the school hallway at dusk as they gazed at one another.

“What about being an idol?”

“...An idol?” That sudden random word popping up made Kei blink a few times.

Reiji, on the other hand, just continued on about what he thought.

“Since you’re pretty.”

“...Am I?”

“You can make a lot of money without doing something as dangerous as mini-jobs.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I meant it to be... Is it not?”

Though the girl was exasperated by the baffled-looking boy...

The way he narrowly dodged trouble seemed to have touched her heart somehow, as she giggled.

“You’re a strange person. An honor student with bad rumors about her, becoming an idol. Is this some weird attempt to recruit me?”

“I don’t have any connections like that. I think you’ll find them if you look, though.”

His eyes were like a 3D scanner—observing her with no sexual intent, gazing at her from the ground up.

Her head was large, her torso small, her legs long. She had the so-called model body. Her slender frame was maintained not as the result of deliberate moderation but through a natural lifestyle, and everything was proportional.

Her beautiful skin was clear. Her face was clean, with little make-up, but she looked quite pretty even with just the minimum. You could imagine that if she

learned how to polish herself, she would get some incredible results.

Her eyes glimmered with curiosity. She seemed coolheaded yet was somehow also warm. Her beauty was a mineral-like garnet, with the added warmth of her smile cracking through, giving a sense of heat like glowing embers.

“You’re weird...,” she said.

“I am?”

“A lot of people give me creepy looks. On the train, in the classroom, in the hallway.”

That wasn’t bragging. She was just pretty enough that if you asked a hundred people, about all of them would be convinced that she was worth that much.

She wasn’t mistaken about herself—it seemed she was just aware of her own exceptional looks.

“But *you* think of my face, chest, and legs as, like, some cool-looking branch lying there in the park.”

“...Ah, I see.” Reiji nodded with a look that said, *Now that you mention it, yeah*. “It’s a very good branch. If my sister were to pick it up, she would definitely use it as a holy sword. You can be proud of it.”

Be it something you were born with naturally or an art that was polished through human effort...

“People want to experience beauty. They want to be closer to it, and for that they will pay a price...money. Having a high-value product just by existing is an amazing talent. You can prove your value simply by being alive,” he said.

Without even the need to work in the cleaning business in a town as dirty as the depths of a gutter.

Reiji felt a pure sort of envy. He understood that he also had some worth in terms of looks, but since he was a Special, that amounted to nothing more than a stray cat with a nice coat.

“Even creepy model scouts never valued me that shamelessly.” Her expression went beyond exasperation into confusion. “Are you a human trafficker or something?”

“No, I envy that one photo is enough for you to show your value.”

He remembered a quote he’d heard somewhere—

“No matter how I work and work, my life never becomes easier.”

A stray cat was a stray cat. No matter how beautiful their coat, the majority of people wouldn’t pick them up and take them home. At the very most, one would offer them a can of cat food on a whim, with goodwill mixed with superiority on their face, and that was it.

But that was just what Reiji wanted.

“My partner and I have to work in order to be acknowledged. Talk to me awhile, Kei Kakiba. I won’t take up much time.”

“Kitsune udon.”

“...?”

“I haven’t had lunch.”

It was a surprising response to a request to question her, and Reiji considered for a moment.

But Kei readily pointed toward the end of the hall—to the café space in the dining area built into the school.

“Treat me.”

It was a simple demand.

*

Slip, slip.

With movements so smooth that one could hardly hear any slurping noises, the thin udon noodles were sucked past her lips.

It was as if he were watching some kind of time-lapse video. She brushed her hair back so it wouldn’t get in the soup and occasionally wiped her skin, which was sweaty from the heat of the broth as she downed her order in about three minutes.

“Thanks for the food. You don’t want anything?” asked Kei Kakiba, having devoured the kitsune udon until there was not one drop of broth or piece of

green onion left.

Reiji, who was calculating the contents of his old wallet, replied rather sadly, “I have no money. Being a poor student.”

“Me either. You paying helps a lot.”

“Does the udon taste better since I’m paying?”

“Way better. Especially when I think about you sitting there hungry.”

“Don’t season your meal with my frustrations.”

The cold look on his face made it seem like he was joking, but his hunger was real.

His afternoon lunch box was fish sausage and rice balls. That day, it was Getsu’s turn to cook. He could cook decently enough, but it was all the cheapest food possible to save money. The unsalted rice paired well with the taste of fish sausage, but it chilled the heart.

Thinking back on his eating habits made him envious of this hot udon—and *that* felt a little pathetic.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Kei asked after politely setting down her disposable chopsticks and moving her bowl aside. She had a surprisingly cooperative attitude. “I won’t answer any questions I don’t want to, but I’ll give you a bowl of udon’s worth.”

“Thanks for your cooperation. It’s about the track club first-year girl who passed away the other day. Mai Ikeda.”

Her fingers twitched slightly. She controlled her expression. But she did give away a bit of shock.

He was certain that Kei Kakiba had known the hit-and-run centaur—Mai Ikeda—when she was alive.

“People witnessed you in contact with her when she was alive,” he said. “What did you talk about?”

“I don’t think it’s good to probe into the private lives of the dead.”

“I agree. But I’ve had a request from her friend to investigate her death.”

“...You’re a detective?”

“Sort of, but I’m a cleaner. I don’t have permission to do detective work.”

In other words, this was not legal, but as a Special with limited human rights, that didn’t apply to him in the first place.

He wasn’t bound by the rules—and of course neither was he protected by them. It was an either-or situation: In order to gain protection, you would also be bound.

“So you’re unlicensed. Is this a challenge against a controlled society?”

“It’s part of my profession. I’m not challenging anything. I’m a kept pet, and my taxes are high.”

There was his income tax, municipal tax and other charges for participation in public services.

It was a tight situation, just barely being able to be human via the credit score of Fantastic Sweeper, which he worked for.

“Think of it as, like, a bonus service for clients. It’s work.”

“Isn’t that sort of thing a secret?”

“Not really. So what’s your answer?”

Instead of replying, Kei pulled out her phone. “I’m giving back your three hundred and fifty yen—the cost of the kitsune udon. Let me transfer it.”

“Unfortunately, I only take cash.”

His antique flip phone didn’t have an electronic cash app for money transfers.

When he showed her, Kei looked a little daunted.

“...That’s so analog.”

“My credit score isn’t high enough. I’d like to have a credit card one day,” Kei said, but she put away her phone and pulled out her wallet.

Her wallet was just as worn out as Reiji’s. The print of an anime character from some generations back was peeling off, and she pulled a few coins out of the zombie-like wreck that remained.

With a *snap*—

Making a sound like a shogi player slapping down a tile, she put the coins on the table.

“So this means you won’t talk?”

“Nope. It’s true that I talked with her. I’ll acknowledge that.” Kei carefully put away her battered wallet and stood from her cafeteria seat. “I won’t say what about. Since it’s private. So I’m paying you back.”

“I see. Then I’ll look into it myself.”

“Fine. I’ll make sure it won’t get out.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“Mm.”

As soon as she said that, she spun away.

Reiji was watching her leave the cafeteria with unerring steps, like a model, when he felt a light impact on his back.

“Heya!!”

“...That hurt.”

That slap on the head made Reiji turn around. There, he saw the pair he’d been expecting.

“Don’t give me that! You better be taking this seriously!” said Mei.

“You’re way too direct, you absolute dummy! Like, you can’t just ask her straight-up! Can’t you more, like, kinda chat her up nicely and make her let it slip or something?!”

Having watched it all unfold, they must have gotten worked up. They jumped on him like everything they’d been holding back was breaking through a dam.

But Reiji easily avoided their pressuring.

“I got permission. She said we’re allowed to investigate.”

“What’s the point of declaring we’re gonna do it...?” said Getsu. “That’ll just put her on her guard.”

“That doesn’t matter. I know where she’s going.”

“Huh?”

Without getting into a panic or making a fuss—in fact, not even moving.

Without doing anything to follow Kei Kakiba as she left the cafeteria, Reiji said dispassionately, “Imagine what could have triggered a connection between Kei Kakiba and Mai Ikeda. Do you think an honor student with bad rumors going around her and a track club member after revenge would normally get involved?”

“Well...maybe not.”

“Right. And Kei Kakiba is the sort of person you just saw. There’s no chance she would have been the one to initiate.”

“Since they’re both antisocial people? Wow, that’s convincing.” Mei said, looking simultaneously exasperated and convinced.

Reiji just took her ironic statement at face value.

“According to the track club’s testimony, Kei Kakiba and the victim have come into contact at school a few times.”

The testimony from the track club girl. She had witnessed the two of them together “a few times” at school.

“They weren’t just chatting. If they had a continuous relationship, that meant Mai Ikeda was the active one contacting Kei Kakiba, leading to them forming a relationship. And what brought them in contact was...”

An honor student and an avenger.

If there was anything that would tie the two of them together, it was...

“...a bad reputation in the school, most likely. Mai Ikeda hadn’t been visiting the Masquerade before the incident. It was just recently that she had started taking breaks from the club. It was, at most, a month.”

“Yeah, according to the track club girls’ testimony, it was about that,” said Getsu.

“In other words,” Reiji continued, “a serious but introverted girl who was

dedicated to her club but not good with people sneaked into the Masquerade on her own, crossed paths with yakuza and gangsters, and bought some Mythic Tonic.”

“...When you say it out loud, it sounds pretty absurd,” said Mei.

“In your opinion, was Mai Ikeda the sort of girl who could do that?”

“No way. She could get scary when she lost her temper, but she wasn’t shrewd like that.”

A faintly smoky, burnt scent started to waft around.

The sky appeared red through the large window at the cafeteria wall, with twilight approaching.

“It’s natural to assume that someone showed her the way. Someone who would bring a girl unfamiliar with the town into the deeper areas, who would guide her to making a deal for the Mythic Tonic.”

Reiji’s hair started becoming vaguely unstable—coming undone, like a smoldering crater, from the edges.

Wreathed in faint smoke, Reiji fiddled with his bangs, revealing the sharp light in his eyes.

“Mei. If it were you, would you admit so readily that you were visiting the Masquerade?”

“Of course not. It’d be embarrassing as hell—actually, if it got found out, I’d be suspended or expelled.”

“It’s like a minor saying they’re visiting a sex business.” Getsu seemed convinced.

Reiji nodded.

“The essence of the Masquerade is a place to vent the frustrations of a controlled society, a place where one can release stress outside of the personal authentication system. Getting doxed at a facility with personal authentication and at school would be a nightmare.”

Someone would have to have built up a lot of trust or be part of a group that

shared the same lot and knew each other's weaknesses.

Either way, it had to be a group with strong connections, or they wouldn't go into that town together.

"Having no friends, it would be impossible for Mai Ikeda to sneak into the lawless area on her own. Psychologically speaking, it wouldn't be like her, and there's also the question of what she could do if she went there. There being such a long time between Mei's accident and the incident was most likely for those reasons," Reiji said.

"She wanted to get revenge, but she couldn't go into the Masquerade on her own...huh?" said Getsu.

She had no connections. Even if she could make those ties at the school, it would normally be a secret among friends, and they wouldn't let it out.

If she wasn't willing to reveal her secret in a relationship where they'd only just gotten to know each other, then...

"But then there's an honor student with rumors that she's selling her body," Reiji went on. "In a world where even love hotels are assumed to use electronic payment tied to your identity, if a minor were to do something like that..."

"Then it would be paid in cash, in the Masquerade, of course. In other words, if the rumors are true..." said Getsu.

"Yeah," Reiji took over from his friend, deriving the conclusion. "That means that Kei Kakiba is the one at this school most certain to be visiting the Masquerade. The odds are good that Mai Ikeda learned about her bad reputation on an underground school website or social media—and so attempted to make contact."

"And then the incident happened. So..." Getsu sniffed. The entrance of the cafeteria, where Kei had left, was now empty.

The scent that lingered in that empty space was cheap but indicated clean soap—and the body odor of a healthy woman.

With his ancient lineage, the werewolf sensed traces on the molecular level that ordinary people would never pick up on.

“You mean to say that girl was the one who guided Mai Ikeda in?” Getsu asked.

“It’s possible,” Reiji replied. “Her reaction clearly indicated that there are things she doesn’t want to say. Since we have the witness testimony that they both got off at Natsukibara station, it’s just about certain.”

If it were a groundless misunderstanding, she would have denied it, slapped him, and that would have been it.

But the two girls had been seen together at the entrance to the Masquerade.

“There’s the possibility that Kei Kakiba is engaged in that kind of business,” Reiji went on. “If she is finding clients some other way than soliciting on social media and secretly working in that town, then she might be able to gain information regarding the Mythic Tonic.”

There were the “multiple” witness testimonies saying the girls had been together.

Plus, the story from the track club that they had not been in contact just once or twice, but had visited the town several times.

The conclusion that could be drawn from all this was...

“Isn’t it likely that Mai Ikeda and Kei Kakiba made some sort of deal?” Reiji finished.

Mai had found out about Kei’s secret and promised to keep it.

And then as compensation, Kei showed Mai to the Masquerade and helped her get some Mythic Tonic.

They had enough information to deduce this much.

His conclusion derived from the testimonies and Kei’s reaction left Mei dumbfounded.

“...You say some pretty smart things for a guy who can’t read kanji properly, Reiji.”

“Since I left school during elementary, I acknowledge I’ve had a lopsided education.”

Knowledge and intelligence were not the same.

He'd had a warped upbringing, so he was smart but hadn't been taught. Rejected from a controlled society, the monsters were trying to return.

"This is as far as you go, Mei," Reiji said. "We'll handle things from here."

"...You're going to follow her? She's gone, though; is that okay?"

"Don't worry." Enveloped by his faint smoke, Reiji glanced to his side.

At Getsu. Though the moon that was his namesake had yet to climb in the sky and expose his true form.

"That kitsune udon really helped. The deep-fried tofu, broth, and green onions mixed with the girl smell."

It's commonly said that a canine's nose is many thousands of times stronger than a human's.

But a canine nose can't organize the information learned as well as a human, and a dog has limited ways to communicate.

So then what about a werewolf? What if they had a canine nose along with a human brain's processing power and communication abilities?

"Even if she got almost a mile away, I wouldn't let her escape me. We goin', partner?"

"Uh-huh."

Mei watched with concern as the monster duo left her behind and went in pursuit of their target.

— 02 High School Bunny Girl Club —

“So like. Doesn’t following a girl feel kinda nasty?” asked Getsu.

“It’s work. Though, it doesn’t feel good,” Reiji replied as they trailed Kei Kakiba.

They’d started running as soon as they left the cafeteria and caught up to her in a few minutes.

On the train as it smoothly ran along, they followed Kei Kakiba’s black hair bobbing beyond the moderate crowds as she stood in the train car aisle holding a hanging strap.

They wore masks, the courtesy taken for granted on public transportation. While Reiji’s mask covered half his face, Getsu’s mask was pulled up over his nose but shifted slightly to the side. While there were some elderly folk who furrowed their brows at this breach of manners, he ignored them.

They didn’t need to say anything to him. If an incorrectly worn mask was picked up on a company camera, then through facial recognition via social media, the individual would be penalized and their credit score would decrease, if by a small amount.

Leave them be, and they’d be hit with suitable punishment. They could just quietly laugh to themselves about that stupid young person, and that was it.

But for monsters who didn’t even participate in social media, there was no way to be punished.

“Okay, we’re here,” said Reiji.

“This thing is slow,” said Getsu. “Well, it’s the same for everyone, so I can’t complain.”

There was a slight vibration in their pockets. Reiji didn’t feel like bothering to open it up, but he could tell what had happened.

It was a checkpoint—a beacon established at platforms and at fixed spots between stations. It linked up with the cell phones that just about every citizen

had, and when they passed the point, it transmitted their location information to the server.

In brief, whether it be a smartphone or a flip phone, anyone who possessed a cell phone with communication functions would always have their movement monitored and controlled by the government, so long as they used public transportation systems.

“No matter where we go, we’re watched. The invisible cage is so big, you forget it’s even there,” said Reiji.

“You saying it makes you want a break? If it’s just some drinking and violence you want, then whatever.”

“We’re just here to work... Hmm?”

A new vibration. Not the notification of passing through a checkpoint, but of receiving a call.

They both moved to the corner so they wouldn’t bother others and put in wireless earbuds and a bone conduction mic for an extremely low-volume conversation.

This concealed conversation that could hardly be heard by others was with the Fantastic Sweeper building’s secretarial office.

“Hello, Neru,” said Reiji. “What’s the intel?”

“I’ve completed my investigation on publicly available information. Kei Kakiba’s lifestyle support and social support level is B.”

She skipped greetings, and her childish sweet voice tickled his eardrums.

It was the little girl who acted as Narasaki’s private secretary, Neru Hoozuki. Her hair color was like ice, her body appeared to be that of a child, and she wore a business suit like a career woman, properly tailored to her frame.

They had heard she’d been sent from headquarters, but even Reiji and Getsu hadn’t been told the details. Her technical expertise belied her appearance, and all they knew was that she could be counted on when it came to intelligence.

“She receives enough support for a minimal lifestyle, rent included. In other words—”

“Free rent, huh? Ngh! I wish that was me! That’d help so much!” Getsu groaned—the complaints of a poor man for whom rent took up a big chunk of his low monthly pay every single month.

“In exchange, she receives weekly lifestyle guidance and a review via an online interview with a district welfare officer. All her credit card transaction records are inspected every month, and she’s obligated to submit them to an accountant.”

“...Yeah, never mind.” Just imagining it was too much trouble, and Getsu made a face like he was sticking out his tongue behind his mask. “In other words, she won’t struggle to support herself, even without doing any sketchy side jobs.”

“At minimum, her lunch is treated as an expense. It’s subsidized, so it’s functionally free.”

“So she can easily buy a kitsune udon. Then why’d she skip lunch?”

“I acquired the record of her expenditures. She’s been severely cautioned for unaccounted-for credit card expenditures.”

“Wait... Neru, isn’t that illegal?” Unable to let that pass without comment, Reiji pressed Neru.

But the voice coming from the earbuds was nonchalant.

“That’s the problem of the district welfare officer due to their lack of security awareness. They left the copy of her transaction history on the work-provided PC with the default password on it. They’re not taking this seriously.”

“Is that the issue here...?” Even if it had been left out in the open, if you just took it without asking, he felt like that was a crime.

This was the sort of person Neru Hoozuki was, despite being a temporary transfer from headquarters—BT HQ.

She had no problem doing something illegal or legally vague and close to a gray area if it would produce results. With their boss, Narasaki, not doing anything about it, she was basically left to do whatever she wanted.

“Well, what’s done is done. Not like this is new anyway...,” said Getsu.

“Mm-hmm. May I continue?”

“Please do... Should I be getting used to this?”

Ignoring Reiji when he sighed, the young voice coming from his earbuds told him her dangerous information.

“The total sum of her unaccounted-for expenditures is about three million. That’s quite a lot of money.”

“Where’d it go?” asked Getsu. “If you’ve got her transaction history, then can’t you follow that?”

“She’s withdrawn small amounts of cash from multiple ATMs. No online history. That’s the problem.”

“Cash flow going toward who knows where, huh? These days, that kind of thing won’t pass,” said Reiji.

“Indeed.”

That was when Reiji suddenly remembered to check on Kei, who he could just glimpse through the crowds.

She was leaning against the train doors, an old paperback open in her hand. The title seemed to be a literary work from a long time ago. It had to be quite an old book, as the torn cover was fixed with tape, but even that had aged and was peeling off.

A pure and pretty book girl—she looked good like that, artistic in that pose, even. He sensed nothing sinister there.

“Do you remember, Getsu? She paid for the kitsune udon in cash.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah. Though she tried paying for it with her phone, first.”

“We normally carry cash, so we tend to forget, but are there high school girls these days who carry change around?”

“Basically none. It would only be the elderly or for use during natural disasters.”

With the drive for cashless transactions, now that electronic payment had

been popularized, there were far fewer people walking around with cash.

Though cashiers like the Akanebara High School cafeteria would accept cash as a remnant of years gone by, few people used it. However, there were certain segments of their highly regulated society where it was becoming mainstream.

“A way of using money that doesn’t track your transaction history. There’s only one place where you would use a large sum in cash—the Masquerade,” said Reiji.

“That’s gotta be it,” Getsu agreed. “You can’t use smartphones there, after all.”

Therefore, in the Masquerade, Natsukibara included, it was near impossible to make electronic transactions.

Your identity would be authenticated on payment, to begin with, so it would kill the anonymity you’d come for. But old-fashioned cash transactions couldn’t be tracked, and so they were the mainstream in this singular lawless town.

“While I was at it, I also checked the location information tracking logs at the transportation bureau and the visitation records at her apartment building.”

“...That’s some really private information, there.”

“It’s completely useless for Kei Kakiba to try playing the good girl, at this point. For the past month, she’s been returning home very late. She commonly arrives back around midnight, and she’s clearly left records of getting off at Natsukibara Station.”

Leaning his weight on the hanging strap, which creaked, Getsu said, “An honor student’s naughty nighttime fun... It’s natural to assume that’d be in our town.”

“That’s such a middle-aged man thing to say.”

“...That sounds like a lazy title for a porno. It smells like old people.”

“Hey! Shut it! Why do you two only ever work together when you’re teasing me?!”

“It’s your fault for leaving yourself open... And we’re here.”

A faint pressure—and inertia from the breaks. The conversation ended with no good-bye.

The two of them removed their earbuds at the same time and shoved them in their pockets. While following Kei Kakiba with their eyes to make sure not to lose sight of her as the waves of people descended to the platform, they let the flow carry them after her.

As soon as people got off the platform and went through the ticket gates, aside from those riders looking to transfer, all would gleefully head for the room with capsule-shaped lockers—so they could turn off their smartphones inside, get high on Monster Tonic, and go out into town.

Kei Kakiba—she was also heading for one of those. The small bag she carried had to contain her change of clothes.

In a sense, it was the ultimate private space. You would really stand out if you were to foolishly approach a room while it was in use, and if you tried to peep, then you were bound to get beaten up by everyone. There were a lot of Beastpeople around, those who'd already taken the drug, with the accompanying sharp senses.

“What do we do?” asked Getsu. “...If she takes Monster Tonic, it'll change her scent, and it'll be hard to track.”

“There are no security cameras inside, either. Even if there were, we're in the middle of an illegal investigation, and we're never going to get permission to peruse it.”

So then in order to check what was going on inside...they had to peep.

Reiji went to a hidden spot not far from the rows of lockers, facing the wall, and sat down, making it look like he was a student who was feeling sick and about to vomit or something. “My Human Tonic has just about run out. I'll go look.”

“...That seems convenient, but—like, I dunno... It's a real good thing you're not a pervert.”

There was the faint spraying sound of *fsssss*...

Squatted down on the side of the way, head hanging—half of Reiji melted, becoming pale threads of white smoke.

The inside of the lockers was always ventilated to prevent it from filling with droplets and viruses. He approached that vent, which repeated its process of intake and exhaust, trying to get a peek at Kei Kakiba, who was right in the middle of getting changed and imbibing the Tonic.

His eye floated in the mist.

Seemingly drawn in precise dots, said eye was sucked into the air intake.

The view was similar to that of a remotely operated drone. So long as minuscule particles connected him to his body, undone into mist, Reiji would still be able to see. From the tunnel-like air intake, he even got through the anti-virus filter, and right as the inside of the locker came into view—there was the faint color of skin as Kei undressed...

“You don’t think it’s a real bad idea to peek on a girl changing?” Getsu said. “In terms of corporate compliance, that’s a crime.”

“...!!”

The mist eye stopped on the spot and scattered, withering away with a hissing sound.

His field of view closed, and he was sucked into the exhaust once more to escape.

As soon as his melted half returned, Reiji went to his knees like he was exhausted, covering his face with a groan.

“You’re right... I’m awful...!”

“No, it was my fault! Sorry!! It’s work, so there’s nothing we can do!”

“We can’t commit sex crimes. I want to keep to the minimum rules, as a human. I...can’t do it!!”

“You sound so serious! Well, I’m sure you’re right, but sorry!”

“For an instant, I saw... I— I... What have I done...?!” Reiji was actually suffering.

Getsu rubbed his partner's back. "Agh, come on, calm down! Oh crap. She left."

"What?"

It was shockingly fast. Unawares, the rental space had been left empty. A new user went inside.

After giving up on peeking, Reiji had drawn back his eye and spent a few minutes agonizing in self-recrimination, leaving a gap. As if she had been waiting for the moment she wasn't being watched, Kakiba Kei had taken advantage of that opening to vanish into the crowds of the Masquerade.

"I'm sorry," Reiji said. "...Can you trace her scent, Getsu?"

"It's changed quite a bit... I'm not sure, but I can just barely manage a general direction." Shifting his mask aside, he *sniff-sniff-sniffed*.

"If I can find a good spot to 'turn back,' then my nose'll work better. Sorry, but until then, I'm counting on you to blur us."

With a swooshing sound, Reiji's white hair melted into the wind.

A pale white smoke enveloped the two of them, creating a subtle "blurring" around their visual field.

In the Masquerade where Beastpeople gathered, just being in human form alone would create animosity. Until they found an appropriate back alley where Getsu could turn into his Special form, this smoke screen would hide them.

*

"...A high school bunny girl club?"

"Lots of high school girls here! Two thousand yen for sixty minutes, all you can drink..."

A shaggy werewolf—Getsu, with his blond-streaked furry ears flattened in bewilderment, and Reiji, with half his face hidden by his mist scarf, looked up at the sign above a shop about a fifteen-minute walk from the station.

It was a pink neon sign. The design was retro, but the dubiousness of the design was what made it so eye-catching. The place seemed to occupy the whole first floor of a mixed-use building, and it looked like they were doing

some major business, like they were making serious money in this area—the Masquerade’s brothel zone near the station.

There were no customers around, and it was quiet, perhaps because it was too early. As it approached midnight, Beastpeople drunk on alcohol and violence would visit and sate their desires.

The two young men had lost sight of Kei Kakiba.

But the werewolf had unveiled his true nature in a back alley, and following his sharp sense of smell had led them here.

“Isn’t this an adult establishment?” said Getsu. “So they’re actually gonna do it—they’re doing ‘it,’ like sex?!”

“Don’t ask me. Though, it seems they definitely serve alcohol.”

“I dunno how to handle this. What are we gonna do when we expose a high school girl’s dark secret? That’s not our job...,” he grumbled.

Would this be better than the direction they had imagined—some soft prostitution acts with adult men? Or should they assume this was even worse? The basis on which to judge was unclear.

“Do you get this kind of stuff, Reiji?”

“Of course I don’t get it. I’m a minor.”

“Me either. Do they get to touch boobs...?”

“...I don’t think so? I think they only drink together.”

“What the heck; I don’t get it. Is drinking alcohol fun?”

“Are you a kid? Don’t ask me everything... I don’t really know, either.”

The boys tilted their heads. They had seen plenty of the town’s dirty side. They weren’t so innocent that they would blush from witnessing a bedroom scene. But they weren’t informed on the services of this sort of business.

“Anyway, let’s go in,” said Reiji. “We’ll make our judgment based on what we see.”

“I don’t feel great about this...”

When they opened the heavy, soundproof door, the pink lights were dazzling.

The lighting was odd—the theme had to be a tropical paradise, as the interior was decorated with ornamental palm trees. The blue counter had to be invoking the sea.

The vintage pinball machine, dartboard, slot machine, and jukebox gave off the freedom vibes of old America, brightening the overall atmosphere.

“Hello—and welcome to Pink Press! ♪”

The name was a parody of a super-famous hotel on a certain southern island that Reiji and Getsu couldn’t even imagine.

Four bunny girls stood behind a counter surrounded by shelves packed with colorful bottles of alcohol.

They were wearing school uniforms—yet unaffiliated with any one school. The outfits were all different types, from blazer style to sailor uniforms, but the skirts were all short and the tops were slightly open at the chest.

“Whoa... dude...” Getsu, mouth hanging open, was dumbfounded by this new world.

What the heck is this?

They were around 60 percent rabbit and 40 percent human. The high school bunny girls were all about the same height, age, and appearance, which gave Reiji the shivers.

I’ve never seen Beastpeople who were this close to human before.

Regular Beastpeople were 70 percent beast and 30 percent human.

The animal elements would overtake the human ones just slightly, and their skeleton would be human. They were pretty close to bipedal animals. So you basically couldn’t identify individuals, and the drastic change made things anonymous.

However, the four high school bunny girls lined up here all shattered that common knowledge.

Their long ears had shifted to the tops of their heads. Their silhouettes, from

jaw to cheek, were just about the same as humans.

The fur covering their bodies was fairly thin from neck to chest, their natural skin faintly showing through.

Their limbs were clearly human in shape, retaining their primate form. All they had was fur and pads on their palms.

You would never get like this with normal Monster Tonic—you just couldn't.

“Take whatever seat you like. I'm American sable. ♪”

“If you like to take it easy and relax, then I'll hang out with you. I'm French angora. ♪”

“If you want to play games, leave it to me. I'm Belgian hare. ♪”

“I'm waiting for you to pick me—I'm Beveren. ♪”

“Whoa... Oh man, I'm gonna get a nosebleed.” Getsu was overwhelmed, knocked out by the wafting scents of the four high school bunnies beckoning from behind the counter.

It seemed they were all the type of bunny that corresponded to their professional names.

The American sable was a little small and looked cheery.

The French angora featured long, fluffy fur and a sexy bust, the Belgian hare was elegant and slender, and the Beveren's pure-white coat looked cool and beautiful.

All had thin fur around their eyes, shielding them like masks. For that reason, it seemed like it would be fairly difficult to distinguish individuals based on their facial features.

“Can you tell?” asked Reiji.

“Alcohol. Makeup. Perfume.”

“No use, huh?”

From just those three short words, Reiji understood it was impossible. Alcohol wafted through the bar, and they all wore makeup and had perfume sprayed over their fur. The stronger a Beastperson's sense of smell, the more they'd be

bewildered, and it didn't seem Getsu could identify an individual.

"Um, sirs. Who will you pick?" the American sable, who seemed to be the leader, asked suspiciously.

"Uh, sorry... We can't drink alcohol." Reiji lightly waved a hand no. "Soft drinks. Give us anything nonalcoholic."

"Understood! Well then, right this way. If you have no particular selection, then I'll come with you, okay?"

"...Thank you."

Thrown off his game, Reiji was making himself a bit smaller than usual, but he came up beside Getsu to sit at the counter.

"Hey, Reiji. You're acting chicken. You okay?"

"*You* do something about this. I'm no good at this sort of thing."

"I don't know, either! Hey, are we okay? We don't have much money."

"Just act confident... They'll think I'm chicken, too."

"Hey, not fair! You trying to be the only one looking good?!"

"Ah-ha-ha! ♪ You two seem very close. Are you friends?" While she was smiling brightly, the American sable snapped her fingers. "Beveren, *that one*, please!"

"Right away."

The white-haired high school bunny girl, Beveren, moved on that signal.

She deposited juice into mixing glasses polished to sparkling, one after another.

Pouring with speed and accuracy, she added crushed ice and cream and then stirred.

"Pink lemonade. Here you go ♪!" she said coolly, with an added sweetness like syrup at the end as she offered the glasses with a professional gesture.

Opaque pink. The tropical cocktail with chill crushed ice floating in it looked delicious to the tense boys, and they reached out automatically.

“Mm...whoa?! This is good. It’s bittersweet and really refreshing!” said Getsu.

“I don’t get it... It seems quite a bit different from bargain sale canned juice.”

There was no sticky sweetness to it. It had a pleasant taste, refreshing despite the bright color.

It was very much a “welcome drink” that would let you taste the tropics.

“Tee-hee, right? ♪ Beveren’s drinks are really good. ♪” The American sable gave them a friendly smile.

“Man, this really is good. Is this some famous cocktail?”

“It’s the specialty at a famous hotel on a southern island. It seems like you’re not familiar with it... And you’re not taking the Tonic, are you? Are you okay?” The brown-furred bubbly girl tilted her head, looking at Reiji with concern. “It looks like you’re a student. You can’t be coming here with your face exposed. People will get mad at you.”

“What do I do? She’s completely right.”

“Don’t give in, Reiji. You really suck at dealing with this stuff!”

“...”

He tilted his glass with an awkward expression. Smoke wafted and twined around his face to cover it.

“Don’t you run away,” said Getsu. “Sorry, miss. He’s weak to pretty girls.”

“Ah-ha-ha, how cute! ♪ But are you all right, mister wolf?”

“I do get excited. You girls are so pretty, after all.” Getsu paused there.

Then, as if he’d just been struck by it, Reiji gave voice to the uncomfortable feeling he’d been having.

“...Something feels quite off here. This is a very strange business.”

“Huhhh? That’s not true; we’re a very wholesome place! ♪”

“I don’t mean in that sense. Based on the specifications of the Monster Tonic that’s on sale in this town, it’s impossible to get the transformation ratio that you guys have. And in the first place, how did you all get rabbit?”

The Monster Tonic that was sold on the market would only specify the broad category of what you would transform into.

The three types typically sold were Carnivore, Herbivore, and Reptiles and Amphibians. They were all random. Though, depending on the nature and build of the person taking it, the random numbers would lean one way to a degree, but it was considered impossible to completely pick your species.

“Well—”

“...I’ll take over here, Sable.”

Creak.

A large form that made him imagine floorboards groaning appeared from the back of the business.

“That’s not another girl, right? And dude...that’s huge!”

“Flemish giant— You can call me Fley, hon.”

The rabbit had a deep, threatening voice. He spoke with a woman’s intonation but clearly had a man’s voice. He completely filled out his 1940’s American-style zoot suit, a giant man dressed like a fashionable mafioso.

He had bunny ears on his head. The face of this giant rabbit, which would normally look cute and charming, had a different ratio from the girls—70 percent rabbit and 30 percent human. He was an animalistic Beastperson, the type usually seen in town.

The giant rabbit had a missing left ear, and even his left eye was replaced by a dramatic old scar. He looked like a veteran used to dirty work, very much resembling a bouncer who worked at a bar.

“I’m the owner of this establishment. If you want to drink, hon, then can you just have fun?”

“I can’t do that. We didn’t just come here to drink.”

Reiji seemed to have gotten back into gear, chugging the contents of his glass.

Carefully replacing his empty glass on the counter, the boy with a scarf of thick mist faced the giant.

“Someone has been rampaging around town—the hit-and-run centaur, who took Mythic Tonic and killed a number of people.”

“...I’ve heard the rumors. I never imagined Mythic Tonic was real,” the giant rabbit said, eyes locked with Reiji’s as he warily kept his distance.

The girls behind the counter must have sensed the danger, as they went to hide in the back. Reiji glanced in their direction, then pulled his flip phone out of his pocket and showed a photo.

“After coming down from the Tonic, the centaur was sent to a certain hospital. But there, she and her family were blown up by terrorists, vanishing along with the source for the Mythic Tonic. And then we have this business, which clearly uses some abnormal Tonic.”

“Are you trying to say there’s a connection?”

“It’s only natural to assume that. We’ve been entrusted by the town’s management to investigate.”

“The management? I never thought this town had something like that. You’re too young to be police.”

“We’re civilians. There’s no age limit. We have no authority to arrest or search, and we have no power to put you out of business if you don’t talk. But —” A sharp gaze like a knife pierced the largest rabbit in the world, the giant who took that breed as his name. “This is a lawless town. We can ask forcefully until you want to talk. But even saying that, we’d like to do this peacefully, if possible. We won’t cause you trouble.”

“You suddenly marching in here *is* trouble, hon.” Cracking his knuckles, the Flemish giant bared his sharp front teeth. Those ferocious teeth didn’t seem herbivore-like. It was apparently a smile.

“The drinks are on the house, so just go. If you won’t listen to reason, then I’ll use force, mkay?”

“I see,” Reiji said dispassionately...and then there was a sweet sound of *fshhhhhh*...like an aerosol spray.

Reiji’s hair and then his body all blurred at the edges and crumbled, becoming

mist that faintly scattered.

Nobody in the store, let alone the giant rabbit, knew that this was a mythic technique that would bring death—

“Wait, Reiji. You’d kill this guy.”

“...I’d hold back, though?”

“It’s still dangerous, okay. If we’re up against a bunny, then leave it to the wolf.”

Getsu copied Reiji and downed his drink in one go, returning his empty glass to the counter.

The werewolf with the blond highlights, Getsu Raisen, stood before the giant.

“Let’s play, old man. If you can kick my ass, then I’ll assume responsibility and take my partner outta here.”

“Oh my? What a plucky thing to say. That’s just my type.”

“I don’t mind guys like you, either. It’s easier if you can talk with your fists...”

Without a word, the rabbit made his move.

Thick thighs were swollen to double or triple that of an ordinary person. The custom-made bottoms that seemed to have been tailored just for him bunched up as he delivered a merciless roundhouse kick to the werewolf’s side.

“...Whoa, there!”

“Oh my?! ”

A dull creaking sound. A dense feeling like having kicked a truck tire.

Agitation ran through the giant rabbit. The werewolf had blocked the mid-level roundhouse kick with his arm and was grabbing it.

“You’re no amateur. You do some martial arts, don’t you?!”

“Mythic Beasts are all different. Unlike my partner, my abilities are the boring kind.”

Strain, strain, strain, strain, strain, strain, creak.

“Ngk...!!”

Intense pain shot through the ankle in the werewolf's grasp. The giant rabbit just barely smothered his cry, leaping on one leg.

But he couldn't get away. The bone and muscle, caught in the werewolf's abnormally strong grip, continued to creak.

"My nose is real good. Did you know, mister rabbit? Every time a creature moves, their scent changes very subtly. In particular, right when they're about to sock you one, they smell superstrong."

"Aw, no...! I always make sure to bathe, you know!"

"It's pheromones. I can get just the slightest whiff of scents you normally can't sense."

A werewolf could never be taken by surprise.

So long as they were properly alive, the moment a creature thought about attacking, he would smell it and his body would move. Another sniff of the giant rabbit, and he'd even see through his attempts to put up with the pain.

"Your pain is a little sour. It smells like lime," said Getsu.

"Noooooooooooooooooo!" came his ghastly cry. The rabbit bore with the intense pain, yanking hard on the arm that held him.

His core strength was incredible. His ability to do that in an unstable position on one leg wasn't simply due to a Beastperson's strength—it had to be from studying some martial art to a greater degree, but...

"Whup!" Getsu abruptly let go.

Leg now free, the rabbit touched his numb right limb as he stood there.

"...Ngk!"

There had to be a crack in the bone. The moment his body weight shifted off his pivot leg, intense pain ran through his ankle.

The legs that supported this Flemish giant of over six and a half feet were sturdy, but being important, they were also his weakness. For just an instant, he squeezed his eyelids shut, but he opened them again, determined.

"I'm not done yet!! Come at me, you...hyee?!"

“Sorry, you’re too slow, old man.”

The space by the bar was filled with the giant—without knocking over a single of the chairs lined up in the small space.

He’d reflexively closed his eyes for less than a second, but in that moment, the werewolf with the blond highlights had dashed in to grasp his windpipe with thick claws. Getsu’s hand slid in slickly, the claws that extended from his fingertips digging into flesh and fur.

Creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, groan.

“Ngh...kah...gah...ergh...!!”

He struggled, flailed, floundered.

Sliding right in close like a gentleman escorting his lady dance partner, the werewolf overwhelmed the giant rabbit. Though the rabbit looked double his weight, Getsu was not weaker than him.

The pressure made the rabbit’s tongue loll out.

He’s strong! Too strong!! I can’t!! I can’t deal with this!! What incredible... violence!!

The pressure could break the hyoid bone in the giant rabbit’s skull, his brain admiring his opponent in a flash right before blacking out.

The werewolf was stronger in every way. Far too strong. The Flemish giant was no amateur—he was a skilled martial artist. And his physical strength was beyond amateurs of his age—he had the musculature of a pro. And on top of that, there was the enhancement via Monster Tonic.

Was an herbivore weaker than a carnivore—?

Not at all.

In the wild, don’t many carnivores run in packs and aim for the weakened, stray herbivores to hunt? That’s since, in many cases, beasts that eat grass would have more to eat than those that ate flesh, and would be larger, heavier, and stronger.

That principle also applied to people who took Monster Tonic.



The carnivores were more violent, but the ones truly strong in a fight were the herbivores—and the large ones. The large rabbit that he was transformed into, the Flemish giant, was not a combat-oriented animal, but he thought he could make up for that with martial arts and experience.

But no. He'd been wrong. All his crafty calculations were incorrect.

"That's gotta be enough for you, old man."

"Un...cle... I zurrender! Helb...me...!"

The werewolf made him yield with force.

His physical strength was nothing short of tremendous. And then his overwhelming responsiveness, his sharp nose that read his enemies...

Strong, fast, and sharp. There was no way he could match a creature equipped with all three of these—with a Mythic Beast.

"Koff! Koff, herk...!! I thought I was going to die...!!"

"I've got to be willing to go that hard. If I go easy, then I'd just get you hurt worse, right?"

The hand that had been making his bones creak came away, and the werewolf helped the rabbit up as he gasped for air.

"If you're not doing anything bad, then you don't gotta be scared," said Getsu. "We're not gonna do anything, right?"

"That's right," said Reiji. "As I said before, we're not police."

The boy had remained seated at the counter, not even standing from his seat as he watched the fight scene.

To the girls hiding behind the counter, and the giant sitting on the floor, Reiji said, "Tell us everything you know. Kei Kakiba is here, isn't she?"

"...Calling someone by their real name at a business like this is rather socially inept," one of the girls said—naturally, without pretensions, just like how she'd been at school.

Pure-white ears popped out from the shadows where she had been hiding.

An herbivore's figure had been added to the graceful toughness she had as a human.

Wiping her eyes, which seemed different with make-up, that characteristic light returned to them— "I'm sorry, Boss. This is my customer."

"Beveren...no, Kei...!!"

The pure-white-haired high school bunny girl. The white bunny girl, aka Beveren, revealed her true identity.

— 03 Confession —

“I’ll let you have the bar to yourselves while you talk. Get it done ASAP, okay?”

“Thanks, Boss.”

“It’s all right, Kei. Then everyone else. Go have fun outside for a couple of hours!”

“Okaaaay. What’ll we do? Wanna play slots?”

“Let’s get food, c’mon. I found a kinda nice salad bar...”

On that order, the other high school bunny girls left the shop.

But the giant rabbit owner remained, setting his large rear down on a chair with a thud.

“Boss... You don’t mind?” said Kei.

“Leaving just you alone with these boys would be dangerous. I’m your bodyguard.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Oh, I won’t butt in, mkay? I’ll be listening from over there.”

Showing some mature consideration, the owner sat down on a seat by the entrance, a little ways from where Reiji and Getsu sat at the counter side by side. Then he opened an expensive-looking bottle of whiskey and poured a glass.

The strong scent of alcohol wafted around. The white bunny girl standing behind the counter, Kei Kakiba, saw that and picked up an empty glass, supporting it in her palm, and said, “Want a drink? Like more of the same.”

“That was real good, thanks. But well, let’s get our discussion done first, huh?”

“Of course. If possible, I don’t want to hurt you or this establishment. It would

help if you're honest with us."

"...If you're willing to be considerate, I'd rather you not have charged in here to begin with." She gave him a mildly exasperated glare.

Reiji replied smoothly, "We've judged that this is a fairly legitimate business. Ruining a place like that would annoy the higher-ups."

"Yup," Getsu agreed. "The interior look is nice, and the drinks are good. So—"

A bird chirped.

Getsu's werewolf super sense of smell exposed every suspicious trace in the bar.

"There's no scent of dangerous drugs or sex, anything like that. It just smells like booze, food and girls. In other words, there's no sex services or anything, a great place where you just drink. Isn't that right?"

"The pay is good, too. And the owner is a great guy. Honestly, he's been a big help."

"Compliments will get you nowhere, hon... Maybe I'll raise your hourly wage just a bit ♪," the owner teased.

She responded with a little peace sign.

"Aw."

Taking no notice of Kei's charming smile, Reiji said, "There are no laws in this town. Whether it be a cabaret club or a girls bar, you can ignore all that when doing business. But in the middle of all that, you've put up an honest sign and abide by laws you don't have to adhere to when doing business," Reiji said coolly.

Getsu followed up with, "This is a pretty unusual place. Is there some reason for that?"

With the subject tossed to her, Kei answered.

"The owner has been running a bar here since before it became the Masquerade."

"So he's from the old days."

“I own the whole building,” said the Flemish giant. “I’ve paid off the mortgage, so there’s no rent. I can do what I want.” There was the clink of ice. Round ice melted into the amber alcohol in the glass the owner held up. “Back in the day, I was the chairperson of the commercial district, but things have gotten like this, you know? My old friends have all gone, and I’m the only one who’s stayed behind, continuing with the business.”

“Wouldn’t you make more than double in a different line of work?” asked Getsu.

“Love over money, you understand, hon? It’s not eros, it’s agape.”

“I don’t get it.”

Agape over eros. Of course young people wouldn’t understand these concepts from ancient Greek.

“You’re getting welfare, aren’t you, Kakiba?” asked Reiji. “You’re certified lifestyle support B. They should be providing you with living expenses.”

“...They are.”

“So then it’s got to be dangerous to be working in the nighttime entertainment business. Do you need money that bad?” Getsu asked bluntly.

Kei lowered her eyes slightly, then spat, “I have no memory of my childhood. I was raised in a children’s care home.”

“ ... ”

The Specials listened quietly.

In the silence that seemed to prompt her, Kei continued to speak.

“It was a privately run facility, with lots of kids with no relatives living like a family. I was one of the older ones, and I often took care of my younger brothers and sisters... I think I was happy. Though, it was a little loud.

“I don’t mind taking care of little kids, and the housemother at the facility was strict but kind. We were a real family... That’s what I thought.” Some emotion showed at the end, seeming to hide heaviness and bitterness.

Reiji asked, “Were you not?”

“Not according to the country. My grades were good. My lifestyle was good. And I was pretty.”

“You say that pretty shamelessly... Do all the girls at Akanebara have that kind of self-esteem?”

“Who knows? That was when I helped an old man who fell down on the road. When I did that, it went viral.”

She said it was just a coincidence.

The senior just happened to have fallen. He had sprained his leg and couldn't move. It was a short trip, so a car had canceled the automatic drive system. Unawares and not looking at the road, the vehicle had sped forward. She had dashed in, carrying the senior and getting away.

Put it into words, and that was all it was. Someone who happened to have witnessed it had made a video and uploaded it to social media. Kei's heroic action had gone viral and she had been identified, and her credit score had exploded.

“I was designated lifestyle support B. Despite not applying for it, I was told to leave the care home and informed I was getting free tuition and living expenses paid, even though I never wanted it.”

“You couldn't refuse? Your life at the care home wasn't bad, right?”

“I couldn't. They said it was impossible, since there was no precedent.”

The law and the systems that enforced it were incredibly slow to set into motion.

But once they did move, they would crush all barriers, pushing forward until their goal was accomplished.

Going viral, and having demonstrated her character and usefulness, Kei Kakiba had been recognized as someone to be protected—without any right to refuse.

“The care home's financial situation isn't good, so if my tuition and living expenses could be saved, it would help my family a lot.

“There was no reason for me to refuse, they told me... I couldn't argue.

“Everyone tried to stop me. My housemother at the facility was crying as she watched me go.

“I got money and praise—and was made to throw away my family.

“I feel like there’s no point in being angry,” she told them, her words coming one after another as if letting out something that had built up deep in her heart.

Getsu tilted his head.

“Well, I guess not...?”

“If that’s what happened, then purely in terms of the financial burden, I figure things would have become quite a lot easier for them,” Reiji said as he did the rough calculations, writing numbers on his palm. “You get lifestyle support, and the care home gets extra funds. There’s no need for you to work at night.”

“...There’s a little more to this story.” It was a heavy tale. It must have been hard for Kei to talk about, as she took a sip of water she’d poured into her glass. After wetting her lips, she exhaled as if she’d been drinking alcohol, then continued. “After I left the facility, one of the kids there who was lonely...one of my little brothers caused trouble at school.”

“Huh, like what? Bullying?”

“The opposite. He tried to help a kid who was getting bullied—and hit someone.”

Violence against violence. Events that would make you feel justified.

But society’s judgment worked in a completely opposite way.

“He got in a fight with a boy in his year and injured him mildly. And the complete opposite of what happened to me happened to him.

“My little brother was canceled. He was the worst kind of brat for hurting someone. Mannerless trash.

“They got so many objections, the care home’s responsibility was called into question, and their public support ranking decreased.”

“...That’s awful.”

This angering turn of events made Reiji scowl.

“And the cost of damages?”

“About five times my tuition. The other boy’s wounds healed within two weeks, but they hired a lawyer and hammered them in civil court, then got a private settlement. My brother felt so responsible that he couldn’t go to school anymore.”

In addition to the settlement, the burden of the trial costs. The consolation money in civil court. The turnaround of the public support that had once gone up.

The reduction of their lifestyle level. Payments that they should have been able to make fell into arrears, lowering their credit score even further in a vicious cycle.

“I heard that, long ago, shut-ins and kids who refused to go to school weren’t unusual and there was no punishment. But current law won’t recognize it, and the care home’s assessment went down even further.”

“...I dunno, man... That’s pretty harsh.”

Just like a rock rolling down a slope.

Hearing how every possible thing wound up adding to their liabilities, Getsu seemed pained. “How’s your brother doing now?”

“He tried to force himself to go to school and got stomach ulcers from stress. Now he’s in the hospital. When I try to go visit him, he won’t say anything except ‘I’m sorry.’”

“With tax law now, when your rank goes down, your support from the government and tax benefits will change by a whole digit,” said the owner. “It’s the remnants of the old days, when there were a lot of places that were welfare facilities in name only—and wouldn’t take proper care of children or the elderly.”

It had to be because he was older and knew of the past.

The owner scratched his fluffy, scarred fur and said, “I heard about Kei’s situation, and I hired her, hoping to help. She’s a talented girl, and it helps the business, too. That’s how it is... Let’s have another.”

It wasn't dispensing charity, or out of a sense of superiority, but just being businesslike.

Reiji eyed the giant rabbit as he knocked back his booze like he was hiding his shyness.

"That's reckless. She can't be paid through electronic transfer in this town, since it'll be tracked—so in cash? Small amounts would be one thing, but transferring large amounts enough to help the facility on the outside would be recorded."

Then, of course, it would be caught in an audit.

The inflow of cash from an unknown source—the possibility of involvement in a crime. Further reduction in her assessment.

"I thought of that. We donate Kei's wages to the care home."

"Since if it's a personal donation, the money will go into their account. The transfer is no problem."

"Ah. Is that what the credit card withdrawals for an unknown purpose were?" asked Getsu.

The money for an unknown purpose that the audit had an eye on. The large amount of money that had been taken out of her account was...

"That's right. I temporarily changed my money into cash and donated it through the owner. To make up for when the kids from the care home advance in school, suddenly get ill, or when payments get heavy."

"...Money laundering, is that what this sort of thing is called?" Getsu asked Reiji.

"How should I know? It seems like they're processing it an unusual manner... But there's no reason for us to criticize." Reiji looked at the ceiling with a bitter expression. "Are there any other people who know about this?"

"...I told her, too. Since she followed me here and found out about this bar."

The Specials had an idea of just who Kei was implying when she said that.

"Mai Ikeda... The hit-and-run centaur, huh?" said Reiji.

“Yeah. About one month before she passed away...she suddenly came to me.”

She thought back on the events at that time. Behind the counter where the customers couldn't see, she groped under the countertop with her fingers.

She brought out a recording device—an old-fashioned analog tape, an antique, these days.

“Dude, that's old!” cried Getsu. “I've only ever seen those things in museums!”

“You can't use smartphones in this town. So I use it for recording conversations with customers at the bar.”

“Recording conversations with customers? Do you use it to threaten people?” asked Reiji.

“Aw no, nothing like that. You don't get how tough customer service is, do you?” The owner denied what Reiji was imagining. The way he talked, there was no sense he was lying; it felt real.

“In this town, it's totally common for the regulars' faces to be different every day. Today he'll be a raccoon, then tomorrow a lion. But it's different, from the customers' end—if the girl at the bar doesn't remember yesterdays' conversation, he'll be disappointed, right? He'll stop coming.”

“So that's why you record conversations with customers, to remember them.”

“That's right,” said the owner. “I've told them to immediately erase any dangerous conversations or private subjects. Secrets are always kept; bars where they have loose lips are the worst, right? This is only for customer service.”

“...You're really serious about this business. Why is it you purposely use tapes?”

“Since it's too easy to take digital data. The staff here are all good girls, but if you make it too convenient to remove the data, they might be tempted. You can't even get the hardware to play analog tapes in the first place, so you can only listen to them here. It's a simple form of insurance.”

“Huh. Wow, you've really thought about this.” Getsu was impressed. This

thoughtfulness for the sake of customer service had saved some unexpected information.

Kei pressed a button on the recorder to rewind it. The magnetic tape squeaked, and then...

"...It pisses me off. Those assholes who stole Mei's legs...!" A voice emerged from the speaker in poor audio quality. Not the hit-and-run centaur's, but the natural voice of Mai Ikeda. It revealed deep irritation and unconcealed hatred. *"The adults who've made a dirty town like this in order to cut loose and do whatever they want. I'd like to kill them. But I'm weak. Those assholes are all taking the Tonic... I want a weapon. There's some kind of power that can help me kill those assholes...isn't there, in this town?"*

"...I don't know what you're talking about. What do you want?"

A different voice had cut in.

Kei, standing behind the counter, squeezed her fists like she was in pain. It was her voice.

"I won't cause trouble for you. This business uses some special Tonic, doesn't it? When I searched for rumors about the bar on the deep web, it was easy. A place where no matter when you go, there are always bunny girls, a girls bar that specializes in high school bunny girls. Humanlike Beastpeople that aren't in any other shop—that's definitely impossible with normal Tonic. You have some special Tonic, don't you? Something that can let you choose what you turn into and make you less animalistic. So then there also has to be something that goes the other direction and allows you to pick a strong animal to transform into, right?"

"...No. There's nothing like that."

"Liar. Give it to me. If you're selling it, I'll buy. I'll pay as much as you want. Something that can turn me into a superstrong beast, like a tiger or a lion or a bear or whatever. Power to wipe out those bastards who stole her from me, stole Mei from me. If you don't sell it to me, I'll tell...the school, the people who know you, everyone...about all this."

It came with that threat at the end—a nasty ring to it.

The tape stopped with a click, and Kei placed it on the counter, recorder and all.

“I had no choice. But...I really didn’t want to.”

Her eyes went not to the pair across from her but dropped to the tape recorder. They were filled with sadness and guilt more than resentment, and the pain of self-recrimination for the cursed words in that thing.

“We do have a slightly different Tonic. But— I really, really didn’t want her to kill people with something I sold her. So I refused.”

“...I see.”

She seemed far too genuine for it to be a lie or acting. Reiji glanced over to his partner.

The werewolf, who could read people’s emotions and sniff out lies, nodded with a pained look. That meant she was telling the truth.

“Did she try to get revenge after you refused? Did she do anything to expose your secret?” asked Reiji.

“She did. Nasty rumors were circulated about me. People had already seen me visiting the Masquerade to begin with, and there was apparently a number of posts on the underground website about me.”

At first, the exposure had been trivial, like “The honor student is up to some stuff, too.”

But what had added fuel to that and really set the rumors on fire had been none other than— “It was just recently that people were talking about me doing mini-jobs. When I refused to sell her the Tonic, it seems like she exposed me through some direct messages on social media and the underground website.”

“But it’s just barely stayed a rumor. No real proof has come up,” said Reiji.

“Yeah... Since I said I wouldn’t sell to her, *couldn’t* sell to her, even if she exposed me,” Kei said clearly, putting a hand to her chest.

“I heard about the accident her senior, Mei Mezuki, had. They caught the culprit and she got compensated... Looking for further revenge is going too far,

and attacking people who have nothing to do with it is just murder.”

But even conscience-based persuasion didn’t work on Mai Ikeda before she became the hit-and-run centaur, when she’d been obsessed with revenge.

“When I told her that over and over, it seemed like she got sick of trying. She stopped threatening me and started a part-time job.”

“A job...? It couldn’t have been at this bar?”

“She threatened me, saying that if I didn’t hire her, she would bully Kei at school.” The owner, who’d been listening, drained his drink with a bitter look, having another glass.

“If it’s me personally, I’m not going to get weak knees, no matter how you threaten me. But if Kei’s position at school deteriorated any more, worst case, she could lose her welfare. If she was lucky, she’d just return to the care home, but with things like they are now, they’d both be ruined... I had no choice but to do it.”

“So then did Mai Ikeda work at this bar?”

“Yes. She did quite the subpar job. She was bad at customer service and making drinks.”

“But,” the owner said, putting a hand to his cheek, recalling what he’d once seen, “even with twisted motives, she was incredibly enthusiastic about the job. She would desperately smile and flirt with bad men. In town these days, types like gangs, former yakuza, and other criminal groups are banding together.”

She would take on all those sorts of customers with unsavory backgrounds.

Bit by bit by bit, Mai Ikeda had been reaching out in this lawless town.

It was such a hopeless story, Getsu grumbled, “...It’s like she had no idea which direction to invest her efforts, or something. Couldn’t she work hard on a better goal?”

“I don’t think she could,” Reiji responded. “All she had left was revenge against the thing that had broken the senior she admired.”

Kei bowed her head—so deeply her forehead hit the counter, bending her waist just about perpendicular.

“When I heard that she had passed away... I knew that she must have gotten something dangerous from one of those people. I should have stopped her. I couldn’t stop her... I’m sorry...!”

Pain and self-recrimination welled up in her voice, as if she was opening up about feelings she hadn’t told anyone before.

“There’s no need for you to apologize. From what we’ve heard so far, if anything, you’re a victim.” At that point, Reiji suddenly realized something. “When you said I could investigate—could it be that you felt it was okay if you were exposed?”

Was that the reason why, when he had revealed in the cafeteria that he was investigating the incident, Kei had abruptly given her permission before coming to this bar without showing any signs of panic?

She couldn’t be so foolish that she wouldn’t consider the possibility of being followed. So then, that was...

“Because I thought I should take responsibility. I feel like I have some, in her death.”

It was because she had accepted it.

“I wasn’t able to stop her. No matter what I said, she wouldn’t listen. I couldn’t make it public and ask for help from others.”

Because if she had done that, then she would have been in danger herself.

She could make excuses, saying it was for the care home, for the kids who were basically her family, for the housemother—but in the end, it was self-preservation.

Unable to take the cowardice of dressing it up, Kei Kakiba had accepted everything.

“...Since if I did, I’d be at risk. I wouldn’t be able to donate to the care home anymore, either.

“Those were the reasons I made up to lie to myself anyway... I wanted to feel like it would be okay.

“I told myself there was no way she would get ahold of such a dangerous drug

that easily.

“I wanted to believe that if I just sucked it up, then everything would be okay...!”

Head hanging, tears spilled off her pale cheeks.

Her pretty face clouded with pain. Even as a Beastperson, the beauty of her natural face was striking.

It was like a master artisan’s carving of a goddess’s suffering.

“...But now it’s over. You’re going to report me, aren’t you? To the police or something.”

“I dunno about that... Hey, Reiji, is that our job?” asked Getsu.

“No. Like I said before, Mai Ikeda was the one who did something dangerous, and you were the one getting threatened.”

The job the two of them had accepted was the investigation of the culprit in the Ikeda family’s death in the explosion—and the search for the origin of the Mythic Tonic.

If there was a mastermind behind it, then of course they should be arrested, but if these girls were not that, then...

“We haven’t received any orders to arrest classmates at their part-time job. That’s not our responsibility,” said Reiji.

“Oh my. So then you’ll let this go?” the owner cut in.

Reiji waved a hand like he found this a hassle.

“We’re not getting paid enough to add on extra work.”

“...Thanks.” Kei finally raised her head and smiled.

“Ain’t that nice!” said Getsu. “You can be all right sometimes, partner!”

“You didn’t have to say ‘sometimes,’” Reiji shot back. “Arresting her wouldn’t gain us any credit.”

Reiji didn’t think such trivial matters were important, at this point.

There was a more important issue waiting ahead that they had to pursue.

“Let’s make a deal. We’ll keep your secret, and in exchange... Can you tell us about anyone you think Mai Ikeda might have been in contact with to acquire the Mythic Tonic, and...”

This was the one thing they did have to ascertain.

The “special” product that the girls working at this bar had to be taking.

“...your ‘limited Tonic’ that lets you pick what you change into and even change your ration of human traits? There wasn’t even any information at the BT head office that something like that existed.”

Of course, there was no way it was a legitimately sold product.

“There’s Mai Ikeda’s Mythic Tonic and the limited Tonic being used at this bar. If they’re coming from the BT head office trial product sample, then it’s possible they came down the same route... Were they?”

“No. We aren’t buying our Tonic from anywhere dangerous,” said the owner.

“You’re not the one who’s going to make that judgment. We are.” Putting away the gentleness he used toward a victim, Reiji glared at him with the harsh expression of an interrogator. His look sliced right through the owner like a knife before he turned to Kei, behind the counter.

“If you mean the Tonic at this bar...,” Kei began.

“Kei... Are you all right with this?!” He tried holding her back.

In response to his remark, Kei steeled herself.

“I make it. Is that bad?”

“...Huh?!” This incredibly surprising confession made Getsu cry out, while Reiji’s cold eyes widened.

Both the pair’s gazes were focused on the somehow bewildered Kei, as the owner sighed.

Their unexpected enthusiasm caused Kei to flinch a little, and she was taking half a step back, when...

In the fatal opening when all attention was focused on her, when every bit of caution had evaporated.

“Now it’s out. There’s nothing to be done...huh?”

As the large rabbit was looking at Kei with concern, something lightly touched his neck—which, moments ago, the werewolf had just about broken.

Splat!!

“Gerk!”

The sound of bones shattering and flesh shredding resounded.

“Huh...?”

Just as if they had been hit by droplets of rain, fresh blood spattered over Reiji’s, Getsu’s, and Kei’s cheeks.

Reiji wiped his cheek. The blood spray was like mochi, sticky and wet on his fingers. Still uncomprehending, like a spring action, Reiji and Getsu looked reflexively right, to the corner seat at the counter where the owner had been sitting.

It was surreal.

A torso with its neck twisted and head plucked off—the plump, muscular giant rabbit was frozen with his glass in one hand, limbs stuck out stiffly like a bug’s corpse as he slowly fell to the side.

The stools were knocked aside dramatically with a crash. Instantly, blood spread on the floor.

The severed head that had just been removed, the head of the yakuza rabbit with one ear and one eye, was on the ceiling—that’s right.

“Ra...aaaaaaaaaaa—g...” came a nonsensical cry from a figure so thin and emaciated that his bones stood out.

The man stood upside down on the ceiling, as if ignoring gravity. He had particularly long limbs, and his sunken eye sockets were black, exuding a darkness like painted ink where his eyeballs should have been.

His hair was in an even mushroom cut, and it wasn’t clear if he was old or young.

The ghostlike man was naked aside from white underwear. In only a pair of

completely ordinary briefs, he held the head of the rabbit he had just plucked off, bleeding from where its eyes popped out and its tongue was hanging.

“Eh-heh.”

Holding the head in both hands like a basketball, the creature bared his teeth in a smile.

Immediately, black mist swelled up, filling the space. Reiji’s black hair had instantly turned to vapor—his mist body that could freely become matter—to wrap protectively around the frozen and dumbfounded Getsu and Kei, as well as becoming countless spikes that aimed for that thing.

The row of black mist spears shot to the right, forming what looked like a mountain of swords, or a cascade of needles.

The moment it seemed as if those would pierce the thin chest of the man in the briefs, he tossed the head in his hands to the floor, and then like a cave dweller trying to start a fire through frictional heat, he put his long hands together.

...He rapidly rubbed his hands with a *whoosh!*

Reiji’s head was caught by an invisible something, his neck bones shattering as it did a one-eighty.

The *grrk* of breaking bones. With that graphic sound, his head flew off like the cork out of a champagne bottle.

“—?! ”

A soundless cry, mouth open to scream, panic.

Getsu immediately leaped on the counter, shoving the frozen Kei into the shadows to defend her.

“B-Boss... Boss!” she cried. “Just now! His head! And your friend, too! What... wha...?! ”

“I dunno! It’s probably someone after us. Mythic Tonic—or I dunno! That’s no mythical or legendary monster. I’ve never heard of anything like that!!”

Confused and panicked, the werewolf and high school bunny girl shouted.

The two of them lay below the counter and looked up to see that Reiji, who had just had his head torn off, was spewing not blood but black-and-white mist from his neck, his body dancing through the air like a loose balloon.

Zloop.

The row of black mist spears had paused for a moment only to extend once more, piercing the man in the briefs all through his body. As countless holes gouged his thin flesh, his empty eye sockets narrowed in an innocent smile, like a baby.

Jumping from the ceiling where he was standing upside down, he landed on the floor, where rubble and broken pieces were scattered around.

“R-r-r-r-r...aaah...g!!”

“Monochrome Mist Style—A Thousand Black Needles!”

Countless black needles like a strafing machine-gun fired with the sound of thousands of thrusts.

While firing at the monster like a torrential rain, the moment Reiji’s shredded head became mist and melted, it returned to his severed neck, and the formless, microscopic droplets that were the Brocken regained his human form once more.

“What the heck is he...?!” cried Kei.

“...?”

With bottles of alcohol shattered, stools broken, and dust and particle mortar hanging in the air...

In the bar where signs of destruction billowed, a showdown between a Phantasm and a Mythic began.



Chapter 3

Wring Out the Rag

“Do you know about Phantasms?”

They were in a corner of Natsukibara. Because approximately two imperial eras had passed since its construction, the building itself had the air of an antique.

In an office that looked like the back storage rooms of a museum, with rows of mystery specimens, living specimens soaking in formalin, and strange somethings soaking in alcohol, there was a workspace like an air pocket.

A desktop PC shone the colors of the rainbow, with a cyber-aesthetic gaming chair that clashed with the vibe of the room. A little girl in office attire that didn't suit her age, exposing her delicate legs, glared at the monitor.

“Don't ignore me, Neru! Look, I poured some *Kopi luwak* for you!”

“So you chose cat shit to try to cheer up a woman? Drop dead.”

“It's expensive, though. And it tastes good. Anyway, it's pretty difficult to import these days.”

With an old-fashioned coffee mill and the other various tools of a connoisseur lined up to brew coffee, the middle-aged man in a suit and apron served that high-quality drink, said to be made from the dung of captured civet cats.

“As you know. The cyber world was once fully open and completely uncensored, an internet environment where the entire world was literally connected—but the global chaos that began with skyrocketing infection inspired the digital blockades.”

“I know that. The end of globalization, right?”

Delicate economic relations and national security based on interdependence had been destroyed by wars, caused by authoritarian states run amok.

The deaths from the skyrocketing infection had shown no signs of even slowing, deeply damaging the authority of nations—and authoritarian nations, wanting to avoid the fall of stock prices, currencies, and economic chaos, had closed their internet environments, deciding on what was, in effect, national isolation.

This had brought about confusion, war, and mayhem that continued to cast a

shadow over the whole world, and only this Far Eastern island nation continued to enjoy peace.

“Many in government have concluded that over-evolved communications lead to the masses going out of control. For that reason, we’ve arrived at the current madness: regulation of speech, policing of social media, and making political awareness uniform.”

Internet environments excluded public forums and public search engines.

The public forums of vice were the cyber slums, those places that wouldn’t be censored, the darkness of the internet that didn’t exist on the platforms offered by big corporations, sites that couldn’t even be accessed without downloading some secret special browser.

“Phantasms—the rumor talked about on the deep web,” said Neru.

“Exactly! People call it hearsay or an urban legend.”

Get to the bottom of it, and all myths and legends began with rumor.

Only those who gained unique individuality and character and became well-known among the population.

They would gain their own names, become Phantasms, and be passed down to later generations.

“Once there was an artist. He had a very unique taste, making lots of eerie carvings out of stone and concrete materials with people as the motif, and before you know it, they spread as an internet meme.”

While speaking, Narasaki presented a few images, deliberately printed on paper.

They were all grotesque. While they were all just stone, these works of art expressed humans in distorted shapes. Even after being explained, they felt real, like the horror creatures out of movies.

“This was back at the height of global culture, when there was no information control like now. People consumed these images as content, commenting on the works as they pleased, and then before you know it—”

Fantasies inflated and went out of control.

Posts on posts solidified and congealed, and finally, they gave birth to a legend.

“‘What the heck, this is creepy.’ ‘Is it gonna attack?’ ‘It looks like it’s gonna kill you...’” Neru read out the printouts, in essence, the records of forum posts.

“As these *prayers* accumulated—a Phantasm was born.”

Piling up one after another.

All the many throwaway remarks made of malice, delusion, suspicion, semi-trolling, just killing time—irresponsibly.

They piled up like snow, filled with wickedness, and the name of the offspring they bore was...

“You mean like a supernatural phenomenon generated by rumor?”

“Yup, that’s what I mean. Put in the terms of my world, as a Magus—”

Their malice converged on one point of focus.

The term that referred to the act of causing a supernatural phenomenon via human hands.

“They call it mystification.”

The smell of coffee wafted around, as if to make up for this abominable subject with this drink foodies had once beloved and praised as the greatest.

“This is just something I’ve heard through the grapevine. Well, there are various theories.

“Consider the now-extinct ancient humans. If you compared Cro-Magnons with modern humans, which do you think would be superior?”

The unexpected question made Neru suddenly lift her head from her monitor.

“Well, you’d normally assume that those of us alive now are superior.”

“But the latest theories say that’s not the case. The Cro-Magnon brains had greater capacity than modern humans...and it’s also possible they were more athletic. Modern humans *may* be inferior to ancient humans.”

But it was ancient humans who became obsolete and evolved.

Modern humanity, which was supposedly inferior in performance, had survived to become the rulers of this planet.

“They say that the key that divided the two was miracles—whether they possessed mysticity.”

“When you report your superior for displaying his bizarre religious views, do you take it to the same place as for harassment?”

“It’s not religion, and I’m not going to ask you to believe it, either. Want creamer in your coffee?”

“Sugar, too. Give me a triple-triple.”

Three creamers and three teaspoons of sugar.

While making coffee so sweet it even seemed to have a thick consistency in a bone porcelain teacup, Narasaki continued even more smoothly with his dubious story.

“Ancient humans were strong. Because they were so incredibly capable as individuals—there was no need for them to form large groups.”

It was estimated that, at most, thirty people—four families—was the limit.

So long as they were living in a natural environment, making groups larger than that was inefficient.

“This is because living in a primitive hunter-gather society, where you keep animals and hunt for meat, the food resources you can gain are limited. Even if you made a larger group, you wouldn’t be able to get enough food from your territory, and you would simply starve.”

“...This is like some civilization strategy game.”

“In the sense that the results change depending on the allocation of limited resources, exactly so. As a result, ancient humans were unable to outgrow groups on the family level, and unable to form larger groups—for example, a nation.”

However, modern humanity was weak.

“Therefore, they had to make groups with those beyond their families and

bloodlines.

“Because they were weak, there were always threats, and they had to defeat ancient humans—with whom they competed for the same position—and the other creatures of nature to survive. So they developed a means to unify as a group.”

“A means to unify as a group... Rules? Like laws.”

“That was one of the things. But there’s something more primitive, more instinctive, isn’t there?”

A Kopi luwak, just like the one he offered to his secretary, Neru.

But it was all black. Enjoying the scent and steam of the black coffee with no milk or sugar wafting up, he said, “It’s God. They believed in their existence, worshipped their ancestors, and prayed to nature. By praying to the same divinity, people shared lifestyle customs and ethics and sexual mores—and made groups larger than the family unit.”

That created the rules, the common sense for people to form groups.

“The power of thought, of wishing, is just that powerful—powerful enough to conquer this planet.”

People were light. Religion was the lens.

The lens focused the light, gathering it at a point to light a fire.

“With the modern decline of religion, the same role is performed by the nation, law, technology, money, and...in this nation, that role has been succeeded by the ambiguous phenomenon that is the ‘social air.’ Even bound in the shackles of the nation’s regulations in a controlled society, people’s consciousness will focus and heat up.”

Narasaki put his hand to the steam that wafted from his cup.

He smiled cynically as the steam cooled, condensing on his palm, becoming droplets that dripped down.

“Currently, the result is more like dirty, ugly sludge. The hundreds of millions of people who live in this country, their grievances and anger, anxieties and prayers, their wishes converge here and there, dripping down.

“No matter what regulations are made—mystification will happen infinitely.”

“Even if all that nonsense is true. Does it have anything to do with us?”

Hearing that bored remark from his secretary, Narasaki smirked as he continued.

“Of course! Our parent company, BT, captures the Phantasms that are modern mysticality in the making, contains them, dissects them, and makes use of their abilities.”

The Mythic Tonic was created from the mysticality of the past.

Monster Tonic was made from the mysticality of the present.

And then the future Phantasms that were about to be born right now were dissected, and the extracted spinal fluid was...

“Apparently, the Phantasm Tonic was one of the products the company leaked.”

“...”

Neru quietly put her lips to her cup, tasting just a bit of the hot liquid.

And then after some silence.

“Did you...tell Reiji and Getsu about that?” she asked.

“I only just got the call about it, okay.”

Narasaki’s desk was a little ways away, with the rotary landline phone. Just a moment ago it had rung, and after the call, this hobbyist had leisurely ground his beans and poured himself a cup, not ashamed at all as he shrugged.

“You can’t use smartphones in this town. How would I contact them? It’s impossible, okay.”

“That’s true enough... But won’t they be in trouble if they run into one of those?”

“I suppose. The Phantasms it creates are given ‘ranks’ once they’re discovered.”

Safe, secure quickly—green.

Dangerous, secure immediately—yellow.

Destruction. Secure with any means possible, whatever sacrifices necessary—dead.

“Not red, but dead?”

“It’s a silly wordplay. Since that way is cooler.”

“I would hate to meet destruction under such lazy criteria.”

“We have an agreement. Let’s pray that this won’t be the last coffee break for humanity,” Narasaki said, and then he lightly touched his own cup to Neru’s.

The artisanal porcelain made a resonant clink, and spellbound by the sound and the fragrance, he said, “Cheers. Now then, I wonder what will happen?”

“...”

Beside the man as he grinned, cup in the air...

Neru silently wiped the edge of her cup where they had touched with a tissue.



— 01 Rules —

Meanwhile, in a certain area of the Masquerade, inside the high school girls bar, Pink Press—

“R—”

“Rrrrrrr—”

“Rrraaaaaaa—...aag!”

Flaring his lips like a monkey, the Phantasm with the bob haircut, naked except for briefs, grinned.

Pallid skin, bluish-black gums, stark-white teeth.

The thousand black needles stabbing into his eerie bare skin was a technique thrown by Reiji Kasumi, the Brocken. Just like the needle guns depicted in science fiction, the storm of black needles fired at high speed tore the muscle and bones of the Phantasm to shreds.

Black-red blood in scattering sprays, sticky clots made a grotesque painting on the pink interior of the store, but even when bone and organs peeked out from the split-open flesh, it still seemed like he felt no pain whatsoever.

“For real? No damage at all?!” Getsu cried.

“No... It is actually working,” Reiji told him.

The split flesh, shattered bones, the fresh blood scraped off him wriggled.

Reiji, Getsu, and Kei were immediate witnesses to those parts gathering to reclaim their previous state, like countless worms returning to the thin, human-shaped Phantasm, restoring his original form before their eyes.

“He just *goes back*.”

Reiji’s observation—if he were invincible, then he would repel all attacks and be unscathed.

But that thing was not invincible. The ultra-high-speed black needles gouged into flesh and bone and wounded it. But the parts they ripped into instantly

reverted to their original shape, taking him from the negative numbers back to zero in an instant.

“Aaaah!”

“...!!”

With a whoosh, the Phantasm put his palms together once more, rubbing.

Instantly, Reiji’s neck was broken. Intense g-forces went sideways, an invisible pressure that bent his neck right to the side, from 90 degrees to 180, making the shattering crack of bone to rotate 360 degrees.

Just like a doll with a broken core, connected to his torso only by flesh and blood vessels that wouldn’t tear, his head dangled.

“...!!”

The strangled shriek of a girl.

That cry came from Kei Kakiba, hidden under the other side of the counter after being thrust aside by Getsu.

But Reiji’s twisted-off head immediately disintegrated into black mist and instantly reconstructed itself again. Black mist spewed out, particles that could form anything attacking the Phantasm, becoming thick blades that struck him in the Adam’s apple.

“Monochrome Mist Style—Black Decapitation.”

“Rrr?!”

A black guillotine attacked the Phantasm, slicing off his head.

There was a popping sound like the cork coming out of a wine bottle. His head flew away, cervical vertebrae remaining like a stump.

Blood spurted like a fountain. As it rained down around them, the skinny Phantasm in his underwear groped around like a clown to pick up his fallen head, then set it over his severed neck.

“Rrr.”

There was an added emotion on his upturned face.

With an elated look, as if to say “How unexpected,” the head that was supposed to have been cut off laughed.

The slice wasn’t even there anymore. The neck and body stuck together instantly, full restoration complete.

“...H-his head! It flew right off; how is he okay?!”

“Huh? Which one?”

“Both of them! The black-and-white guy and the underwear pervert! How can they be fine when their heads were cut off?!” cried the white-furred high school bunny girl, Kei Kakiba, in utter confusion—her usual cool had completely evaporated.

“That’s just how Reiji is. He honestly won’t die even if you rip off his head; he’s fine, he’s fine!”

“That’s pretty weird, too!! Then what about the underwear pervert?!”

“I dunno about that. I wonder... But well, I could make some guesses...!” While grabbing Kei and guarding her, the descendant of ancient werewolves, Getsu Raisan, groped in his pocket.

“You’re gonna use your phone?!”

“The back alley is one thing, but I think I was still getting a signal in here... Ah, no go!!”

Cell phone service was very bad in the Masquerade.

Cellular towers existed, but they were abandoned. They were just barely maintained in the station area and on the main roads, but go a little farther in, and it was most likely out of range, so you couldn’t connect.

This bar was located comparatively close to the main section, but even so, Getsu’s cell phone was silent, and he was forced to search the area.

“This sort of business’ll have one, right...there, like I thought!”

In a spot where the customers wouldn’t see—there was a landline phone hidden underneath the bar counter.

Getsu picked up the cordless receiver, hiding from the rubble and shards of

glass that flew at him from the fight as he pressed the number he had memorized. In just three rings, he immediately connected.

“A nasty fight, after all?” The secretary’s voice sounded disappointed, even.

“Neru?! Tell us if you know these things!!” Getsu snapped back at her.

“I only just heard about it from the boss. What’s the situation?”

“A skinny old man in briefs is doing a screwing thing to pluck off heads; what the heck is that?!”

“What the heck; that’s scary. Huh...? Creepy. Isn’t that creepy?”

“It’s real creepy, but stop being freaked out and come up with a strategy! No matter how many times Reiji kills him, that bastard doesn’t die! The boss, where is he?! Let me talk to him, Neru, come on!”

“Yeah, yeah. Um, briefs? A screwing thing and plucking off heads. What is that like, specifically?”

The voice on the phone switched to that of a middle-aged man who sounded like he was playing stupid.

To the side of the receiver, Getsu said toward the mic, “Like, he spins ’em around? Like twisting them off...!”

“...Like wringing out a rag!” Kei yelled next, making up for his vagueness.

The way you wring out a rag—with the hand closer to you palm down, the other hand palm up and twisting to the inside.

That Phantasm, the perverted monster in a pair of briefs, had persistently repeated that gesture.

And each time, something got twisted. In the bar, now a battlefield clouded with black-and-white mist, the air swirled in a spiral to grab Reiji’s body, wringing him until he shredded.

“He even says it himself! Like...rrrag, rrrag!” cried Kei.

“Ah, I see. Rag, rag, huh. Roger, I’ve identified him.”

The invisible something twisted and crushed the pinball machine, and the flippers, pins, and balls scattered.

Ignoring the underwear man chittering like a monkey, and Reiji, who remained as mist as he continued to dodge the spaces being wrung, Narasaki read out some documents over the phone in a calm voice.

“Collection number Y030125...the Rag Wringer. That’s a Phantasm that has recently come into existence.”

“Huh? What’s that mean?!”

“Supernatural beings that are born from the gathering of human consciousness. On this island nation, they were once feared as gods—or made use of as curses.”

Sometimes they were made gods, sometimes curses.

They were supposedly long gone now, becoming only tainted remnants that were stored as relics in museums.

“That’s what they are. Think of them as similar to Mythic Beasts, but something that has appeared more recently.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me! Give me like...something more specific!!”

“The only thing that differentiates him from you two is the year in which he came into existence. The mysticality of ancient times is history, the years passed down in stories heavy, and therefore, the gods and monsters of myth and legend are wreathed in powerful mysticality. However...”

The overwhelming difference between the ancient time of the gods and the modern era—

That was the explosive growth of humans, who would give rise to the Mythic.

“An immense number of people have learned about modern Phantasms, in other words, urban legends and conspiracy theories, wishing, praying, fearing... Therefore, even if the mysticality is weak, there’s an incredible amount of thought gathered, in aggregate.”

“...And so?”

“They’re just incredibly strong, even without any history, legends, or anything. If Mythic Beasts are the nobility from ancient times, then Phantasms are conglomerates of the nouveau riche. Their output more than makes up for the

weak mysticity.”

Basically, a rubbish heap of malice had given birth to the newest miracle drug.

“People who take the Phantasm Tonic surpass humanity. It’s best not to think of them as proper creatures. Think of them as more like monsters of incredibly absurd urban legends and conspiracy theories.”

“Huh?! What are we supposed to do against something like that?!” Getsu yelled at the receiver.

Grabbing the thick fur growing out of his shoulder, Kei warned him, “Hey! Don’t yell so loud... He looked at us!!”

The phantasm’s black eye sockets goggled, his eerie, thin face turning to look at the pair hiding under the counter. He spread his hands wide to clap them together as if he was going to pray and wrung the air vertically—

“Crap!!”

“Yeeeeeeek!!”

Getsu immediately wrapped his arms around Kei’s waist, grabbing her like a sack of potatoes and leaping away.

Instantly, an invisible whirlpool attacked that spot. The air was wrung, and the landline phone and alcohol bottles and glasses that had been left behind were twisted in an instant, shattering into dust and scattering.

“Old man...you’re not any help! You’re not giving me any info beyond ‘He’s really incredible!’”

“M-more importantly! Are you okay? That blood—you’re bleeding...!”

“Huh?”

Having landed in a corner of the bar, Getsu must have been caught by the invisible whirlpool, as all the fur on his back—skin and meat and all had peeled off, and the raw, exposed flesh was red with fresh blood.

But he said calmly, as if it didn’t matter, “That’s no big deal. Since tonight...”

Shudder, shudder.

“There’s a nice moon out!”

His flesh writhed like maggots, and then the skin bubbled and bulged.

His shredded, gouged flesh became pink in the blink of an eye.

It swelled up to become a lump, growing peach fuzz that turned to fur. It was superfast regeneration, like photos taken over a long period of time gathered into an instant, condensing hours into seconds in a time-lapse video.

“I don’t need treatment. I heal fast.”

While facing off against the monster that was called a rag wringer, Reiji told Kei like it was nothing, “My partner, Getsu, is weresick—the carrier of a magical disease.”

“Huh...? He’s sick?”

“Don’t worry. You won’t catch it.”

“I’m not worried about that. You don’t have to lie down or something?”

“...Wha—?!” That unexpected line of worry made the werewolf’s eyes widen.

She didn’t seem to be joking. The scent that wafted from her body was the milky odor of complete earnestness. It was the smell of maternal hormones, concern, and anxiety. In other words, regardless of the situation, Kei Kakiba was worried about Getsu’s health, since he was considered ill.

“Kakiba. You’re...really strange,” said Getsu.

“Huh?! Yeek!!”

Smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, sounded continuous claps. The rag of air was wrung.

Smush sloop grind zlup splat crunch scratch. The space twisting, matter compressing, a whirlpool of destruction.

No way! But he shouldn’t be able to see all that!!

With the weight of a person over his shoulder, Getsu continued to dodge the invisible twists. Even if his fur was pulled off and shredded, flesh peeled away skin and all, he didn’t flinch. He was dodging the fatal grabs so closely that they just barely took only his skin!

“Y-you can...see...?”

“Ohhh. I got an actual reaction out of ya,” said Getsu. “So you can say something besides *rag*?”

The rag wringer cocked his head.

Getsu twitched his nose, making the three whiskers that grew out from its sides tremble.

Oh, it's his whiskers.

Kei Kakiba figured it out, but she didn't say it out loud. She wouldn't give the enemy information.

Much of the time, a beast's whiskers will function to sense obstacles around them and maintain their sense of balance.

The Beastman—Getsu Raisen's spatial sense was incredibly sharp. The fine ends would *touch* the air, picking up on sounds and vibrations, sensing the infinitesimal signs that were generated the moment the air was twisted, evading it quickly.

The clapping stopped.

“Rrr.”

Still in that rag-wringing pose in the ruined bar.

The rag wringer tilted his head like an innocent child and asked a question.

“Y-you—run. Doesn't—hit. I—take—him—wring. Wring—that—girl...!”

“Sorry. I can't give her to you.” In response to that nonsensical string of words, Reiji cut between Getsu and Kei to stand in the way, his outline dissolving in mist, a figure with a vague form.

“Has it. She. Make—Tonic. Can make. She—said.”

“...You were listening?”

“If. Then. Special. Her. That girl. Wring. If I wring—and swallow.” Suddenly, his words came out sharper. “I. Can be human again... Maybe. Eh-heh, eh-heh, eh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...!!”

As he grinned, purple gums bared, his face was repulsively human.

The three others present reacted differently.

“Who’s gonna let you do that? She’s a girl, you asshole!” Clear-cut refusal. Carrying Kei under his arm, the werewolf’s throat vibrated as he growled.

“...You’re that guy who was always in the bar? That’s so gross...!” Sincere disgust. The high school bunny girl wore a look like she’d found an unpleasant pest in an unexpected spot.

“Phew...die.” Nothing more than the urge to kill. The Brocken paused with sincere exasperation. “I don’t know who got those delusional ideas in your head—but you’re trouble. Going so goddamn far as to kill people.”

With a fsssssssss, Reiji’s outline melted away.

As black mist, he would create tangible things. As white mist, he could change his properties into formless things, liquids and gases.

Now he was an intermediate color that could turn to either. Filling the air with a gray mist, a mix of the infinite variety that served as his limbs, he considered how to kill the monster of urban legend that could be said to be immortal, the rag wringer.

I’m not feeling it working. Even though I hit him with that much of the Black Style.

If he hit him, he could gouge flesh and shatter bone.

But the damage would instantly become zero, not leaving even a stain of fresh blood on the Phantasm’s briefs.

Then different rules. There’s no point in simple destruction of his body. I need different conditions. In order to kill this monster, I need rules to that end. If I could just understand what they are... I could kill him.

He was certain. But...

“Honestly, what do you think? Can you win?” came Getsu’s sudden question.

“I feel like it’s not working. Neither of our attacks are. If I hit, I could kill him—but I can’t reach,” Reiji replied briefly, and right away, there was the sound of another clap.

The gesture of grasping air and wringing. The werewolf jumped for him at once, and Reiji, left behind, instantly disintegrated. An invisible hand grabbed the mist and scattered particles, the twisting and wringing distinctly visible.

A *pshhh* sound like steam spurting from a pressure cooker.

The mist leaked out from the cracks of the invisible force field that compressed the particles to once again construct the form of the boy.

“...*Kah!*”

Suddenly, the boy held his stomach like he was in pain and vomited blood.

“Huh?! Um... That looks like it hurts!”

“It seems...,” Reiji answered Kei, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. A not insignificant amount of thick blood dirtied his uniform.

“It seems he’s got a grasp on *my* rules.”

The Mythic Beast that was the Brocken, Reiji Kasumi, a monster of unclear form, couldn’t be killed by normal means.

Whether you sliced him, stabbed him, or shot him, it was no use. There was no way to injure his body, which would melt in an instant and return to particles, and since he could change his molecular geometry at will, he could also handle heat or drugs.

But...

“We’re both wreathed in mystery. So that bastard figured out the trick...!”

One was an old, unnamed creature of whom legends had vanished, his true nature buried in the darkness of history.

“Rrr.”

The other was a newcomer. An urban legend, a monster from conspiracy theories.

That hand transcended the rules that had been taken for granted, grabbing Reiji as mist, demonstrating the power to twist him.

“Y-you-ou-ou. Mist? But...still a place...can’t *fshhhht*? Eh-heh, eh-heh. Person. Mist. Person. Mist. Mixed person. Crush—the parts, and...I can...kill you,” the

underwear monster said falteringly, continuing to talk and talk.

“Don’t underestimate me, rookie,” Reiji declared with calm confidence and certainty. If he couldn’t kill him, then...

“There is a way to fight.”

“A...ag?!”

Reiji Kasumi made a sign with his fingers. Honestly, he didn’t understand what it meant.

It was just a tradition passed down from parent to child in their ancient bloodline as the descendants of Mythic Beasts, thought to have no meaning, not considered much, an antiquated relic that has always been made fun of, but...

Even he himself was vague. Reiji would become mist at the edges, becoming particles to disperse. So as a way to control himself, seals and spells were a type of fixed form, and by chanting, he could become the seal that he had created with his hands.

“No way...!”

Dumbfounded, the high school bunny girl looked up.

The mist that filled the room instantly turned black. Reiji clapped his palms together and clenched thin air as if he were balling rice.

“Rrrrrrrrr...!!”

The shrieking cry cut off.

Instantly, a cube appeared, with a deep blackness that swallowed all light around it.

It was a barrier for sealing Phantasms, and by squeezing his palms forcefully and continuing to press, he exerted intense pressure on the inside, an extreme environment comparable to tens of thousands of meters down in the ocean, a special move that would crush with lightless, extreme pressure.

Monochrome Mist Style—Black Coffin of the Absolute Seal.

“...I don’t really get what’s going on, but wow. You could beat that thing?!”

Kei said.

“No. I assume you can’t see it... But the bastard is just fine—and raging around in there...!”

Reiji’s clasped palms trembled as if something trapped inside were flailing around.

Fresh blood dripped from his tightly, tightly pressing fingers. It was as if he were holding back a dam that was about to burst at any moment.

“Getsu! You take care of her!! And—!!”

It was a vague order, but...

“Gotcha!!”

“Huh?”

His partner, the werewolf, put an arm around Kei’s slim waist as she stood there, dazed.

He yanked her close to him again, sweeping her legs out from under her and spinning her around—it was what you’d call a princess carry. Holding the high school bunny girl like that, Getsu slipped past the side of the black cube and leaped into the street.

*

“Why are you running? Are you gonna abandon him?!”

“That’s not what this is!! He’s in trouble, and we’re gonna regroup!”

They sprang out into the pleasure quarters. In the nighttime town with its rows of scummy bars, he hooked his claws and pads on the vertical wall of a high-rise, vaulting a number of times off verandas and drain gutters, getting to the roof just about instantly.

He’d gone over thirty feet vertically. Kei was momentarily dizzy by the vertical g-forces that couldn’t be compared to a normal elevator, but still, her white rabbit ears twitched, and she tapped the arm that was carrying her.

“I can run myself... Can you let me go?”

“Sure. Can you jump, Kei?”

“...Honestly, I’ve never done it before.”

She landed soundlessly on the roof of the building. She stripped off the heels she’d been wearing, shoes for customer service.

Her legs still had human shape, but with the fur and pads on the bottoms, even barefoot, it was as if she were wearing socks.

The werewolf’s claws clicked as he ran, digging into concrete. At his side, the high school bunny girl Kei Kakiba followed with a hop, jumping over the roof railing and high into the night sky above town.

“...Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!” A laugh spilled out of her lips.

Exhilaration. Her rabbit ears fluttered in the wind. It was as if the intense wind was lifting her.

The nightscape shining below was beautiful, even if it was a city of vice, with its flashy neon signs, the fires lit in eighteen-liter drums in back alleys, the prostitution vans creaking, the security buzzer that someone had left ringing in vain.

The werewolf and high school bunny girl landed on the building next door. They didn’t stop there, running, going from building to building one after another, crossing them like stepping stones.

She’d never used her physical abilities as a Beastwoman before, and this was a chance to awaken them to the fullest. Her grief over the death of her benefactor and the shock of the monster’s appearance were blotted out by the adrenaline bubbling within her.

“This is more fun than I thought! I never imagined I could do this!”

“Sorry to bother you when you’re getting high, but a phone! Look for a phone, okay!”

“I left my phone at the station!!”

“I know that, I mean a landline! We can’t take that monster to the station—who knows how many people’d die, getting dragged into it. There should be a phone somewhere!”

While leaping, Getsu focused his eyes, looking for a phone.

“He’s got that thing locked up, doesn’t he? Isn’t it okay now?” asked Kei.

“I dunno. But we can’t be sure, up against that thing.” Ruminating over the earlier conversation on the phone, Getsu’s brow furrowed. “He’s not a normal Beastperson or a Mythic Beast. Can you have a proper fight with a Phantasm...a who-knows-what-the-hell kinda monster out of a horror movie? I’ve gotta call the boss and hear the rest of what he had to say!!” He put up his pinkie and thumb in a phone gesture. He was so panicked he stopped watching out for the enemy and raised his voice.

“Don’t yell! I can hear you, okay...!”

Kei’s white rabbit ears twitched. The effects of Monster Tonic had changed her hearing. She felt the minute vibrations in the concrete she walked on with her bunny pads and could respond reflexively. Her brain processed the information, projecting the auditory information into her sight.

Clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk...!!

“...Jump!!”

“Wah?!”

Grabbing the werewolf’s arm, Kei jumped straight up. The air was dirty, haze wafting under the shining moonlight.

And then with a *clunk clunk*, the place where they had just been standing, the concrete rooftop...

“Rrrr...ag. Eh-heh.”

It was loudly warped, and the underwear Phantasm leaped out under the moon.

It’s no use. We...can’t get away!!

Kei reacted immediately. In midair, there was heat around the Phantasm’s deep eye sockets.

He was looking at her. That gesture of wringing a rag, once more. Lock on—certain he would get her. Instinctive warning. The fur along her back all stood on end. The moment she accepted she would die, she would be killed.

“We’re saved, Kei!”

“Yeek!”

“Aag?!”

In the air where there was no foothold, where she should have been unable to move...

Getsu, who had sprung up at the same time, lightly kicked Kei in the shoulder. It was a powerful strike with soft footpads, no claws.

Intense sideways g-force. As the Phantasm’s profile loomed close, the werewolf, who had used Kei’s shoulder as footing, kicked and shattered the Phantasm’s head.

“Rrr...aaaa—agggg...!”

The Phantasm’s head indented like an eggplant, and he fell straight down. He bounced on the roof, where a big hole had opened in the rubble.

Even after being slammed down, he got up again, clouds of dust around him. His head was bent to the side like in a comic book. He grabbed it in both hands, forcefully bending it to try to make it straight again.

It was a comical gesture, depending on how you looked at it. But—

“Why the hell did you let him get away, Reiji?!”

“Sorry. He suddenly disappeared.”

“Ah?!”

Black mist spurted up from the hole in the roof that the Phantasm had warped from a moment ago.

It emerged just like smoke from a volcano to instantly take form, changing into the black-and-white-haired boy.

The sound of ringing steel. He drew a sword of nothingness, trailing particles of darkness. It held the glow of charcoal that had been burned into something mineral-like.

When he swung the black blade in a full arc—there was a nasty, scraping sound.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaa...guh?!”

“This is no good, either. What a real waste of time.”

A black sword like congealed shadows. This Black Blade made of Reiji’s mist slid and slipped through the gaps between particles and could slice apart anything, but—

It was like a game of *daruma-otoshi*, where you try to knock out pieces of a block tower without collapsing it. While his head was sliced off in an instant, the Phantasm would scoop up the pieces of his head that lay on the ground and hastily try to put them back in order. The pieces had already adhered, and they were going back to normal.

“He got out again! How? You caught him!” cried Kei.

“All I can say is that he suddenly disappeared. Instantly, the thing inside was gone, and when I followed you two, I found this.”

Pointing the tip of his blade at the Phantasm as he reassembled his head, Reiji spat out the blood in his mouth.

The coagulated blood melted into the air, becoming one with the particles wafting around. As Reiji once again surrounded the underwear man in mist, Getsu came to a soft landing at his side, saying with aggravation, “Well, that’s the cliché, right? Monsters from horror movies are just like that.”

“Why do people watch that sort of thing for fun? Go love something smaller and cuter, humanity,” Reiji shot back.

“I don’t think this is the time for comments like that! So then there’s no point in trying to trap that thing?!”

“I don’t know. But we have space here. There’s no one around.”

In the high school bunny girl club, the small bar, he hadn’t used it.

The other style Reiji Kasumi, the Brocken, had.

“I’m going to use White Style. Look for a landline, any business open now should have one.”

“Gotcha. I’ll leave this to you!”

“Huh...? Hey!”

The werewolf grabbed Kei’s hands and leaped down off the roof.

Neon lights were shining close by. The two of them landed in front of an open bar by a group in the middle of a party, some cheap beer of unknown origin and fried chicken from who knows where in front of them. Getsu and Kei headed straight to the bar.

“Rrr.”

“...?!”

The moment they looked away, he was gone.

The Phantasm, who had been putting together his sliced head just a moment ago, was not there. There was no trace of him.

Turning around, Reiji looked down. Right by the entrance to the bar...

He could see the drunken Beastpeople bothering the high school bunny girl Kei as she tried to get into the shop.

It was too far, so he couldn’t tell what they were saying. But one of the Beastmen stroked his hand over her sexy butt, with her round tail sticking out, and Kei turned around for an unhesitating left hook, bursting out to send him flying and knock over the table.

Booze spilled, snacks scattered, glasses shattered.

“...!”

“...”

Getsu’s expression said *Oops*. Kei coolly shook out her punching hand.

Before them, right in the middle of the drunken Beastpeople, was a mushroom-cut man who looked clearly out of place.

Reiji saw him—the Phantasm was suddenly standing there, just like a correct answer in a spot-the-differences picture.

“There he is,” Reiji said. “So when you get away from him, he materializes close to his target, after all.”

Reiji didn't know—he had never seen horror movies or heard any urban legends.

No matter where you ran, it followed. It showed up like an apparition, even in places that should be safe.

The most absurd supernatural phenomenon of urban legends, the most deviant rules.

“Rrr.”

In the crowds, the business district filled with drunks, standing right in the middle of the street—

The rag wringer spread his arms wide, about to clap to twist, wring, and kill Getsu, Kei, and the dozen odd Beastpeople around, crushing them all into a mess.

“I won't let that happen!!” He leaped into the air unerringly.

Before he could feel himself fall, he turned his whole body to mist.

With a *boff* noise, his body turned to gas, then slid downward like dry ice pouring down.

“Wh-what the hell is this?! I can't see anything!”

“Oh no, a fire? Yeek!!”

If the contradiction of heavy cotton were to exist, then Reiji would be that right now.

The white smoke that spread around the crowd felt soft, like a fluffy cushion, pushing aside the Beastpeople all at once with a pressure they couldn't resist, saving the people who fell like dominoes, bringing them to the edges of the street.

There was an uproar. Cries, panic. A cumulonimbus spreading on the road. Witnessing that, Kei and the werewolf, the pair who'd had the drunks bothering them, now noticed the Phantasm about to wring the space—and Reiji's approach.

“...Rrr!”

The clap came like a slam.

That rag-wringing gesture and then the moment space was twisted...

““Daaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!””

Kei and Getsu leaped on the drunks at just about the same instant, shoving them down and out of the twisted space, saving them.

“Gugyah?!”

The drunks lay on the ground, while at close range, less than half an inch away from their noses—invisible hands wrung the air.

The table seats that were sticking out into the road, snacks and beer and all, were sandwiched by the telekinesis, condensed hard along with the shop walls, instantly twisted to become dust as the explosive sound of bursting air rang out.

“Yee—yeee, yeeeeeeeeeeep...?!”

“Run!! C’mon, go! Nice one, Kei, good reaction!”

“Thanks! But this isn’t the time for that!”

While kicking the butts of the panicking Beastpeople to send them running, the pair of them glared at the rag wringer.

The Phantasm spread his hands for another clap. Behind him loomed a massive cloud, the white mist that assaulted him like an avalanche. It swirled violently around the Phantasm in its center, its powerful centrifugal force pushing away the people who remained.

“Wh-wh-what’s that?!”

“An explosion?! Terrorists? Agh, this blows!”

“Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh!!”

Panic. The Beastpeople gathering in the pleasure district ran around frantically trying to escape, while a homeless guy sitting on the road clapped his hands, jeering at the people’s confusion. There were some who tried to push aside the cloud, but they couldn’t do it.

Some people might have seen a similar cyclone in a certain animated movie—the great vortex of clouds like a dragon’s nest gained an irritating odor.

Monochrome Mist Style Black hardens the mist for use, and White leaves it as gas or liquid but recomposes it.

Reiji Kasumi did not know his ancestors. He'd heard nothing from his parents, either. He just knew that was what they were, and in elementary school when he'd learned he wasn't human, he had heard the tradition passed down in the family from his trembling parents.

It was stupid, ridiculous gossip. Hand signs and words for spells like something a delusional middle schooler with a vibrant fantasy life would come up with. They had been the final hope that his parents had given to him as a child, likely an exam to determine if he was other than human...

Thinking, he shouldn't be able to do it. There was no way he could do it.

Praying, wishing, he'd been taught the tradition. Once he was taught, they had become deeply ingrained in him.

Sorry, Ikka.

His sister was the one person he wanted to apologize to.

Within the mists, Black and White, that were supposed to be her brother, filling the child's room...

"You don't have to apologize," she said. "Even if you're all misty, or I can't touch you, or you smell funny. I love you!"

He couldn't believe it and asked why.

"You're my only brother. Of course I do!"

She had smiled for him and then died.

It had been a family suicide. Now able to use the family tradition, there were no excuses to be made—Reiji was a monster. He was the very reason that the Kasumi family had been hated by the government of this nation for generations.

The crackling of scattering sparks. The nasty smell of burning flesh. The stench of scorched fat clung to his nose like scent from a candle.

It was the house where the family had once lived. A flashback, the memory

“Ahhhhhhhh!! Ahhhhhhhhh?!”

The Phantasm writhed. His briefs scorched. His skin burned. His haircut was in disarray.

The burns healed from the edges. But the combustion was faster than the regeneration. His skin and flesh sizzled as they burned. Still in pain, he clapped over and over, twisting the space and wringing his rag. The flames were crushed with the invisible telekinetic hand.

For just an instant, a gap opened. But it was instantly blocked off by the blazing flames, making escape impossible.

Reiji ran through the swirl of flames like a silhouette. There was the combustion of gases, forming black-and-white smoke and flames. The flames themselves were Reiji, and the smoke generated from that, the airflow, the heat, all of it was a part of him.

Dammit. My consciousness is fading...!!

His mind was melting into haze. Unlike the Black Style, which hardened mist to create substance, the White Style was difficult to control.

Simply put, he couldn't recognize himself anymore. He was a gaseous entity that faded into the wind, the air, outlines blurring, and couldn't understand even how he himself worked as a Mythic Beast.

The greater his range, the more his consciousness faded, and his control couldn't reach the edges.

Causing a big fire in the middle of the pleasure district right now was out of the question.

Whether they be a drunk, or a prostitute, or human trash, their position was higher than that of a monster. If he burned even a hair on their heads, he would be held accountable—his earnings would decrease, and the day when he would be recognized as human would grow even further away.

But even then.

In your stead.

His sister's face rose in his mind.

Taking the knife herself when his parents had tried to stab him, even while being killed by her own parents, she had smiled.

As if to tell them that she didn't resent them. As if to tell them that she loved them—

The silhouettes of his parents, who had poured gasoline on that vacant smile, and lit the fire with a cigarette, bursting into flames.

Melting into the scorching heat. Embraced by Reiji, mingling with the flames itself, their corpses burned to a crisp.

Embraced until they became ash.

Like a shadow play in the middle of the blazing flames, the hell that Reiji had reproduced, the two monsters danced.

Until I attain normalcy...I can't die!!

Just like cremation to mourn the dead.

Together with the Phantasm, Reiji continued to dance with the flames.

*

"Flames...!"

Like a scream, they were burning.

The pillar of flames towered in the empty space where the crowds had been pushed aside. With a swirling crosswind that was so hot it made hair sizzle, it blew away the placards and neon signs of the pleasure district as the fleeing Beastpeople were chased by the flames.

Like a blade stabbing the night sky. It reached out, long and sharp.

"It's like a scream."

"You're sharp, Kakiba," said Getsu. "Reiji's pushing himself really hard."

The werewolf and high school bunny girl were side by side looking up at the swirling flames.

The drunks who had been bothering them and even the staff had fled the bar in the blink of an eye, so Kei and Getsu had slipped in, searching for a landline phone around the counter and register as they turned back over and over

toward the wild flames.

“He’s a Mythic Beast,” Getsu explained. “He was born one, a real throwback with thicker blood than me. He’s a natural—he doesn’t take Monster Tonic, he takes Human Tonic to turn from a Mythic Beast into a human.”

“...So then that form, that hazy thing is his real...?!”

“Yeah, that’s right! The more he uses his power, the more he erodes his humanity. After doing something that reckless, he might burn out in a few minutes!”

“So...what happens then?!”

“He’s mist, you know? He’ll be beyond taking the Tonic. He won’t be able to regain human form. It’s not even certain what’ll happen to what’s in his head, his memories, or his will. In other words, as a human...”

“He’ll die... Is that it?”

The cessation of vital functions isn’t necessarily the same thing as death.

Even if the body survives, if the experiences and memories that form their character are lost...

Then that could be said to be death.

“And Mythic Beasts are real dangerous stuff. If Reiji burns up all his humanity, we don’t know what he’ll do...!”

“We have to stop him... We can’t let him do that!!”

She hadn’t known him for very long. But even so, Kei Kakiba had come to know Reiji Kasumi.

At a glance, he seemed to be a cold person. He was curt and blunt, and his compliments were strange.

But though he’d tried to hide how considerate he could be, and as displayed by his kindness in trying to protect Mei, he’d failed to conceal it entirely.

What about being an idol?

Such a silly remark.

I envy that one photo is enough for you to show your value.

She had thought he was trying to rile her up. But that was probably how he honestly felt.

The price for an inhuman monster proving his worthiness to participate in society—the weight of the liability he had to pay just to live as a human—was surely many times heavier than the household finances or payments to her care home than Kei could imagine.

“There it is!”

Inside the counter with the register, a cordless landline phone had been hidden by the open door.

Nervously, she picked up the receiver and heard the dial tone—the proof that the line was connected.

“Awright! Give it to me; I’ll call him right now!”

“...Okay!”

Kei tossed him the receiver and then looked up at the flames piercing the night sky once more.

A mix of black, white, red, and orange. The flaming whirlwind swept up smoke and fire, growing larger and larger, big enough that now it could easily swallow a whole high-rise. The wind moaned like a person’s cry, but the flames hurt no one.

There were scattered bits of paper and flammable items dotting the area, plus a gas cylinder for cooking and cars.

Like a giant standing on its toes, the flames maintained a dangerous balance as they resisted the urge to spread.

“Hello, Boss! Boss?!”

Kei Kakiba couldn’t even hear the desperate voice of the werewolf.

She was that entranced by the flames.

*

“Yeah, yeah, I can hear you. By the way, I can see it from here. Man, that’s a

pretty dramatic fight, huh?”

Somewhere in the Masquerade, at the Fantastic Sweeper office building.

Looking down at the nightscape from the president’s window, the city in the distance shone red.

Lit by a tornado of flames that pierced the sky, the president—Narasaki—spoke through the old-fashioned telephone. “Could you not cause so much damage? A fire really would be a bad idea. No one has insurance in this town, and we’ll be the ones doing the cleanup.”

“This isn’t the time for that! That rag guy is immortal, okay!” came the voice snapping at him from the receiver. He could sense the werewolf Getsu Raisen’s impatience in his tone.

“That’s not true at all. He’s not even comparable to you, a pure werewolf, in terms of physical durability. Frankly speaking, any random guy should be able to beat him with a metal bat.”

“Huh? But we’ve gone nuts on him, stabbing and slicing and crushing and burning him, though?!”

“Yeah, of course. He’s in a different dimension. Let’s use an allegory,” the president said. “If you cut the moon reflected in the water, then do you think that’ll cut the moon shining in the sky the same way?”

“No way. You’re not even touching it.”

“That’s how it is. What you guys are doing is just the same thing. Phantasms are not typical creatures, but rather the latest type of Mythic Beast born from rumors, folklore, urban legends, and conspiracy theories living in the moment.

“So there’s no point in materially destroying the body that only seems to exist in our world. The true nature of a Phantasm is in the reality shift formed by humans’ collective unconscious. So long as you’re not attacking based on those laws, then it’s all completely useless. In other words...” Narasaki must have gotten himself worked up, as he seemed rather enthused.

Twirling the cord that connected the receiver to the phone in his fingers, he said, “That’s the essence that makes the ancient Mythic Beasts and modern

Phantasms into reality. The Monster Tonic currently sold is the manufactured residue of the mythic stripped of its mysticality, the dregs of it rendered completely safe. Do you understand?”

“...Never mind all that now; can you just tell us how to handle it?! We’re really in trouble here, for real!!”

“Good grief, you’re so impatient. I’m handing over the phone.”

“Ah, hey, Boss—!!”

Not waiting for Getsu to speak, Narasaki handed the receiver over to his secretary, Neru, who was waiting.

The slight girl with silver hair in office attire smoothly operated the brand-new tablet PC that was out of place in the Masquerade, peeking at the dark side of the internet, the cyber world that could never be browsed with conventional methods.

“I have the phone now. I’ve found the relevant logs—a chat thread in the deep web. There aren’t a lot of comments at all.”

“Huh? Neru? What do you mean...?”

“What seems to be the substance of the rag wringer. It’s frankly not much. If something like this will change anything, then...”

Reality is very fragile.

So Neru muttered before reading out the logs displayed on the tablet into the receiver.

*

—Deep web archive old BBS log search results

848: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 8ogh67op

This is a true story that happened to me about six months ago.

Some people in my apartment building tested positive, so I was isolating, and when I was sleeping, I got a phone call.

It was a friend from my class. He was an idiot. The ass knew I was isolating and wanted to rile me up.

I was thinking he was annoying, and I was going to blow him off and hang up when something weird happened.

It seemed that someone had told him he was being loud on the phone, not to take off his mask, and to just eat in silence, and my friend was getting pissed off at them.

“Some weirdo’s picking a fight with me. The asshole’s saying I was spewing spit around, so I should wipe the table.”

“He’s a skinny middle-aged guy with weird eyes. He looks so creepy it’s, like, isn’t he the sick one?”

“Huh? It’s fine, it’s fine, he’s wailing something, but I’ll ignore him—”

That was when there was an incredible *crack* sound.

It was a sound like glass? Or something breaking. And panic on the other side of the phone.

There were women shrieking and staff yelling, too, and I could hear this creepy voice.

It sounded like, “Rrrrrrrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaag.” The audio was bad so I couldn’t really hear, though.

I had my phone on speaker during the call, so it really freaked me out.

From what I heard afterward, when my friend ignored the guy who was telling him off during the call, he broke a beer bottle over his head.

849: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: hukoop056

...Are you in the right thread?

That’s just a dangerous guy, not a scary story.

850: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 8ogh67op

Fortunately, my friend survived and just had about five stitches.

When I got out of isolation and went to see him, he’d kind of changed.

This was the kind of guy who would be drinking at the bar and chatting in a

world where everyone else was trying to prevent infection.

He had a bad attitude, like honestly he was just an idiot. He would say cheeky stuff without thinking about the consequences, basically an idiot.

And now this same guy was all thin and emaciated.

Saying, like, "Don't take off your mask, don't come any closer than two meters, disinfect whatever you touch."

When I told him, "You were never like this before," he said he was "scared."

Even though the culprit who had smashed him over the head with a bottle had already been caught.

That guy's crazy face and voice had traumatized him, and he said he was even having dreams.

"I never wanna get attacked again, so I'm being careful, you watch out, too!" he said.

When I brought him wet tissues, masks, and disinfectant solution as a gift, he was real happy.

851: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: jikiol258

It's kinda cute that he was glad to get tissues.

852: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: hukoop056

So this just traumatized him.

This isn't scary.

853: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 8ogh67op

>>852

This is where it really starts.

Ever since he got discharged from the hospital, he changed completely.

He became like the isolation police? A virus vigilante? The mask police? Or whatever.

If your mask was a bit crooked, if you ate in front of people or didn't wash

your hands, he'd go on a wild rant and rave about it.

And when I asked why he got like that, he said it wasn't because he was scared of infection. He said it was the pain of the beer bottle that had dug into his head.

He tried going to the hospital, thinking there might be a piece of glass still stuck in there.

But there wasn't, and the wound had healed normally...

It throbbed whenever someone was slacking off on virus safety or bothered other people.

Well, he said he got scared, thinking he might get his head cracked open by that guy.

He said that going against the rules just scared the shit out of him.

So he was doing this with good intentions, so the same thing never happened to anyone else.

He was going around telling people off totally out of good intentions. Though, it was annoying.

And he would always squeeze his hands then, too.

He would wring a handkerchief he carried around—or a tissue.

He'd squeeze it like twisting a rag. Squeezing it just like he was wringing someone's neck.

He had really honestly dead eyes; it was scary. People wound up staying away from him in his classes.

He stopped going to the class social meetups and online drinking parties he'd always attended before and broke contact.

...He vacated his apartment, too.

I dunno why, but I got kind of depressed about it right now, so I tried venting about it here, sorry. There's no punchline or anything.

854: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: hukoop056

Well, that feels shitty...

Come up with an ending before you write something, dumbass.

855: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 1kjlj82U

>>853

Nice post. Oh well.

So I wonder what happened to him?

You can't be homeless these days, you get arrested.

856: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 8ogh67op

Who knows? Maybe he's actually attacking people with bad manners, just like the guy who smashed his head in the first place.

Like the girl with the cut mouth, I saw that one in some old logs.

857: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 1kjlj82U

So he smashes your head with a beer bottle? If your mask is crooked?

That sucks ass. Think of a slightly more interesting way to kill someone.

858: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 0lhl;p8565

Yeah, I get that.

How about wringing them to death with telekinesis, c'mon. Like Vader.

859: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: hukoop056

Like the force grip. He was obsessed with rags, after all.

It'd be interesting to make a character out of that.

860: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 8ogh67op

This is more or less a true story, though. A rag?

So then it can end with him becoming a *yokai* rag wringer off somewhere.

861: Isolating anon [sage] post time: 20XX/XX/XXyhmaeawe... ID: 1kjlj82U

This was a fun chat. Cya

This trivial post—

A balut of rumors. An urban legend preformed, a chick boiled before it could hatch.

Ironically enough, it was reposted on public social media and brushed up by the wisdom of the crowds.

“Did you hear the rumor about the rag wringer?”

“Huh, what’s that? An old cleaning dude?”

“No, no. It’s a yokai that strangles and kills people who spit and don’t wear masks—dirty people—with invisible hands.”

“Ah, I like that idea. Loud eaters are real annoying, I’d like them to legally disappear.”

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of online leftovers, fragments of conversation.

“Hey, did you know?”

“I heard this from a friend of a friend.”

As the vent to let off steam in a controlled society.

In places where it wouldn’t be recorded, from one person to another, one mouth to another.

“There are people with bad manners, right? Like old guys wearing their masks incorrectly.”

“Or creeps who make smacking noises when they talk.”

“Or old men who walk while smoking in this day and age.”

“Or annoying kids who ride their bikes on the sidewalk.”

“Men who stand really close to you on the train, people who touch the train straps with their bare hands are, like, unbelievable.”

“They say he comes to gross people like that—the rag wringer.”

“He wrings people into mush like he’s wringing a rag to kill them, right?”

“Huh. What does he look like?”

“A naked man in just briefs? Whoa, creepy. A creep who kills creeps, that’s hilarious.”

“Why not, if dirty people will just kill each other.”

“Bad people, people who bother others—”

“They should just die, after all. Ah, I wish someone would kill them!”

They fixated on their own violent wishes, while omitting the boring parts...

Making a single droplet of dirty words, with only the amusing essence concentrated.

“That’s what that is. The Phantasm of urban legend...the rag wringer.”

At the Fantastic Sweeper office, with a tablet device in one hand, the petite secretary, Neru, talked about their investigation.

The person on the other end of the line—the werewolf Getsu Raisan practically screamed, *“Dahhhhhhhh! I know that, but be a little more specific!”*

“I think this is quite specific, though.”

“No, it’s just weird... Even if a monster was born from those completely worthless rumors!”

There was rustling and rattling noises over the phone.

“Huh? What?”

“This girl, Kakiba! She didn’t do anything like bad manners! Why’s she being targeted?!”

“She’s not wearing a mask, is she? Is there anyone who does, of Beastpeople who take the Tonic?”

“Huh...? What about Reiji? I don’t think he ever took his off... Though, you can’t see it because of the smoke.”

“It’s possible the smoke was deemed to be smoking while walking. And also, that isn’t the Phantasm itself, it’s a human who took the Phantasm made into Tonic, so he wouldn’t act just as the folklore demands. Since he’ll distort the rules to his convenience.”

“...That’s not faaaaaair!!”

It was obvious, once it was pointed out.

The Masquerade sold itself as freedom from all limitations and constraints. There, masks were like proof of those constants, so there weren’t going to be any Beastpeople wearing them. With just that alone, they had cleared the conditions for being attacked.

“S-so then...if the monster was born from fantasies. How do they make the Tonic for that? Where do they get the materials?”

“I’ll answer that. Urban legend Phantasms will materialize when certain conditions are met.” Yoinking the receiver from Neru, Narasaki started speaking with great interest. “On the open web, on the controlled internet, we are held responsible for our statements.

“The information management systems using learning-type AIs that were developed on the next-door continent. They discovered an AI that would search for information on the web, and whenever a person expresses hostility or harm toward society, even if they only implied it and didn’t say it directly, the AI would issue a warning to the person who posted it and administer punishment to their credit.”

And that was the foundation of order that now comprised and maintained this ultra-controlled society.

“But these vulgar stories of monsters, trivial occult discussions— These are not the subject of AI censorship or punishment.”

Since officially they don’t exist.

There was no possibility that something that didn’t exist could hurt anyone, and consequently, with the impossibility defense, it couldn’t be punished.

“They don’t cause injury to the reputations of any particular individuals, and they aren’t dangerous ideas subject to punishment. So that’s where people would throw the dregs of their hearts.”

The black sediment would pile up and up.

And conspiracy theories would materialize, as the outlet for humanity to spit

out their malice, rumors, and urban legends.

“It’s ironic. The foundation for the regulation of freedom of speech, societal control, and information control systems is the suppression of Phantasms. The information control system that was created to prevent the outbreak of Phantasms could lead to the extinction of the human race and societal collapse. Delusions spreading through the population have concentrated and become like a pot of poison.”

Neru dropped her gaze to the tablet she held up in both hands.

To sum up the search results and the variety of information displayed there—

“About six months ago, the ghost story of the rag wringer was circulated based on a true story posted on anonymous message boards on the deep web that were excluded from search engines. The story altered as it went.

“After that, his name was changed, his appearance modified, his behaviors altered. Taking the different variations into account, in addition to translation into other languages, there are...over six million results all over the world.”

“S-six million?!” Getsu was speechless.

“It’s too fast. Too many. Too much. This is spread artificially, manipulated,” said Neru.

It was something that had often been done on the open social media that had once existed.

Businesses, groups, organizations, and governments would engage in cognitive warfare for their own benefit and ideology.

“Normally, AI would target it for censorship before it spread that far. It’s just a petty way to kill time, so you’re not going to hurt your credit to talk about the occult.”

“But they let it run rampant, right? So that means...!”

“The government, or some similar channel—the class of wealthy people who can intervene in the management policies of public social media, who have management rights. Basically, it was done by someone high up. In other words—this Phantasm has been cultivated.”

An urban legend that had been artificially disseminated, overlooked, and cultivated.

“What if social media censors go around erasing those rumors?! Will he disappear?!”

“Maybe. But do you think we have that authority?”

“So we don’t! Then...what about hacking?!”

“On what sort of legal basis would we do that? We’re just a private business and have no power. If we did do it, we’d be treated as criminals or terrorists. It’d just wind up ruining the whole company.”

“Ngh!! Y-you’re useless!”

There was static over the receiver. Then the sound of rustling and shaking, unintelligible male and female voices, and then...

“I’ve got the phone now... In other words, what should we do?!”

“That’s a good question. Who are you? You sound like a high school girl, so I’ll answer.” With that creepy remark, spinning the cord of the receiver around his finger, Narasaki answered, *“Whatever the era or place, rumors will congeal to become Phantasms. Things that should not exist will take form through the concentration of human malice, becoming droplets that drip down. In ancient times, they were called tricksters and yokai, or vengeful ghosts.”*

They captured such things and whittled them down, melting, mixing, and stirring them up, this is the alchemical mystery known as the Philosopher’s Stone. Now such matters were completely elucidated, having lost their mysticity, and as fool’s magic that anyone could do—

“That which is called Libra, the spell of understanding, is what you all drink on a daily basis.”

“...Monster Tonic...?!”

The product just like juice that was being sold in vending machines.

Narasaki revealed that this was what had become of the miraculous medicine made in ancient times by alchemists and witches who had poured heart and soul into it.

“To take beings from the other dimension, premature Phantasms that can’t affect this side, those balut on the verge of hatching, and make the whole thing into a Tonic. That was the goal BT succeeded at.”

Malice condensed into rumors and was anthropomorphized into a doll made of dark fantasies.

The person who took the substance—swallowed it—would morph into a “Phantasm person”—one with the rumors and no longer considered human.

They became almost a conceptual being, their form that appeared in this world a virtual image, like the moon reflected on the water.

They would transform into a monster that couldn’t be hurt, no matter what means were used.

“Its true nature is information. Rumors. Gossip,” Narasaki continued. “Since you can’t destroy that, there is nothing to be done. However, as with Reiji, the more he uses his power, the greater the burden it should lay on his human form, which is his catalyst in this world.”

“In other words...if he uses that attack where he wrings the rag too much, then he’ll die?”

“Yes, that’s it. Well, it’s a little cruel to Reiji, though...”

Narasaki couldn’t know where the limits of other monsters were.

He couldn’t even calculate it—whether it would end right now, or if he would continue to rampage for days.

“It’s Reiji Kasumi’s ability to do that which qualifies him as a member of the human race, despite being a monster. In other words, this is his job—his obligation. I’d say it’s only obvious to leave it to him.”

“...!”

In the silence on the other end, he sensed anger. After a slight pause, the person talking changed again.

“That’s reckless, Boss. I don’t know how many more hours this is gonna take, but if he does that...”

“Reiji is gonna be stuck as mist, unable to turn back!!”

“Losing a worker would be a problem. If we put out a job offer, do you think a new monster will turn up?”

“Grrr!!”

Getsu seemed angry for real, and when Narasaki responded with a faint smile...

There was a tug-tug on his sleeve, and he looked down at his secretary, Neru.

“Is something the matter, Neru?”

“If you’re that mean, they’re going to hate you for real. Why don’t you tell them? Asshole.”

“...Did you just call me something rather awful? How cruel. Good grief.”

He sandwiched the receiver he’d picked up with his shoulder. He heard the *grr, grr, grr, grr* of a beast growling.

As the werewolf was so angry that he just growled wordlessly, Narasaki looked out the window at the flames glowing beyond the townscape and told him, “The true nature of a Phantasm is information. Rumors, urban legends, stories...”

So then.

“An attack based on that content should work...is what I assume?”

— 02 How to Kill a Legend —

And then, within the swirling flames—

With the war cry of “Rrrrrrrrrrrrr...!” from the Phantasm rag wringer, the space was wrung, smushed, and crushed.

Put under extreme pressure, the wafting gases of oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen twisted, but the Mythic Beast who encircled the rag wringer, the Brocken, Reiji, was not there. He was lost in the flames and smoke, his own outline blurring even to himself.

He understood. The Phantasm’s lungs swelled and deflated. He was breathing. It had to be a formality or something other than the inhaling of oxygen and exhaling of carbon dioxide in order to live, and even if Reiji stopped it, it wouldn’t hinder his activity.

But the Phantasm still had to do it. The consciousness that moved the Phantasm recognized himself as a humanlike Phantasm, making it obvious common sense that he had to breathe, or he would suffocate.

After that war cry, the moment the Phantasm inhaled through his nose...

“...Eugh!”

Having turned into hot air of hundreds of degrees, Reiji’s fingertips followed the flow through the Phantasm’s nose and windpipe, sliding in to burn his lungs. The flesh sizzled, and the Phantasm writhed with the agony of burning membranes.

But that was as far as it went.

...He won’t die!

“Rrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

The cells reinflated, and the Phantasm was instantly revived.

There was no point to the agony other than discomfort. To the rag wringer, even burns to the respiratory organs that would instantly kill an ordinary person

were at most merely choking on hot coffee and just made him angry.

He really is a monstrosity...!

He was no ordinary creature. There was no point in wounding him.

It was like breaking the mirror that reflected a monster. Even if you shattered the mirror, it wouldn't hurt the monster.

There was the Brocken, Reiji Kasumi—and then the Phantasm whose name they didn't know, the rag wringer. This was not a battle between living creatures. This was a conflict between two formless embodiments of malice, an attempt to compare strength between an ancient monster and the newest Phantasm.

Oh no—I'm—melting.

This was the downside of White Style. Every time he turned to gas and diffused, his ego weakened.

It was difficult to explain this feeling in words.

If forced to say, it was like when a phone camera's focus was off, and it showed everything blurry. His sense of self would fade, with no pain and sense of danger to warn him, and he would just disappear.

"I tried looking into it, but I don't really get it. So well, let's just call you a vampire?"

After his house burned down, his sister was dead and his parents gone...

That statement from Narasaki, his boss, who said he would be his legal guardian, had been no consolation at all.

"But I can imagine the cause. Materialization through your Black Style is an act of solidifying yourself. The firmer your sense of self, the better it will work out. The change via White Style is the opposite. It's an act of self-transformation. Even just the act of destroying your human form to return to mist means the loss of the clear boundary lines of your body, blurring yourself as an entity.

"And from there, you change into something even more different. You deny what defines you as you, even your own form as a human. Once that happens,

well, it's obvious that nothing would be left, right? Misuse of the White Style in a state where the ego is incomplete will invite the collapse of personhood. Avoid it as much as possible."

Narasaki had rejected that technique with a remark like an irresponsible doctor.

...But...I understand... I do—get it.

In that blazing hell he'd created by using the White Style at full power, the longer he continued to be lost in the flames—transforming himself into heat, smoke, and air, having lost his human form—the more he sensed himself fading.

What would he become, as a result? He didn't know. Surely, he would go back to being a monster of ancient times—something incomprehensible that didn't even linger in legends, its true nature not known to anyone.

I'm probably a curse that's run its course.

So he thought, in his fading consciousness.

He didn't know what he was. There weren't even any rumors or fables about him. The stories were lost, vanished and broken, and all that remained was this vague and obscure Brocken, with nothing to grasp or touch.

What sort of absurd things would the ancient people have been thinking, to have given rise to such folklore?

And through what course of events had that been transmitted down a human bloodline, even leaving behind how to control it, to wind up returning once more in the modern era? Reiji didn't know, and he didn't care.

He was just a monster left over from the distant past, like bathroom graffiti.

Reiji Kasumi figured he was something like that.

To think—someone—like that—

Could save—someone—anyone—

Some nuisance who was allowed to exist in society out of pity.

Could he ever be allowed?

No—

Right as he was thinking *no*, a pain pierced his chest.

She wouldn't—Ikka wouldn't...ever say—such a thing.

She had been a very ordinary girl. He figured that if she had grown up without incident, she surely would have fallen in love in middle school, giving him rather complicated feelings. She was a cute, kind, and normal girl.

His parents had been, too. They had just been very ordinary people, born of a strange bloodline, broken by the handicap that society had placed upon them, running away by blaming all their life's liabilities on the misfortune of their birth.

Them abandoning him. Setting fire to the house and killing his sister— It was all just out of weakness, their fragility.

I want to be—normal.

To regain his sister's lost life.

Until he could attain ordinary happiness, enough for his sister's part, too.

He couldn't die. He couldn't break.

"...It'll be...okay...", she had whispered, embracing her brother while wet with blood. "I'm sure...I'll be okay."

"No, you won't," he'd cried.

"Live. I love you."

The cry wouldn't leave his memory.

The line of aahs that tore through his throat every time he burned with rage, every time he remembered the life that was gone...

*Aaaa-aaaaaa
aaa
aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh-hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!!*

He wrung it all out, for the feelings that he'd screamed until his throat went hoarse.

I have—to do it...!!

Reiji realized that there was nothing to hesitate over.

He didn't want to see anyone suffering with the same feelings. It would hurt to witness that. His old wounds would reopen. His heart would ache.

Because remembering his departed sister, his broken family, that wound—was painful.

Selfishly, willfully, for his own ends.

He would contribute to society. To continue to be human in this world.

To be happy enough for the sister he'd lost—

“—I won't give up on being human!!”

“Rrr?!”

The flames vanished like an illusion.

Scorched rubble, rebar burned until it was red-hot, stinking plastic wreckage—the fire had laid waste to the street, the asphalt melted and beginning to cook. As the Phantasm glanced all around at this sight, Reiji focused on his target.

“Monochrome Mist Style—Savage Black Fang!!”

His heart thudded. The white mist turned black, taking form, and Reiji appeared once more.

The Phantasm turned around. He began that rag-wringing gesture. But before he could do it, a black dog head like a shadow puppet stretched from Reiji's shoulder, and a wolf jaw with sharp fangs snapped at the rag wringer.

“Rrrrrrrrrr...a—ag!!”

“Ngh...kah!”

The fangs bit deeply into skin. They swallowed his whole arm, the wolf fangs reaching his shoulder.

He didn't bite it off—just interfered with the gesture. With one arm occupied, the Phantasm twisted the air with only his remaining arm. It was weak,

compared to using both hands, but agony ran through Reiji's neck.

"Gah...hn...geh...!!"

"Rr...rrrrrrrrrrrrrr...!!"

It was a contest of strength.

The invisible hand of the Phantasm, the palm of telekinesis grabbed hold of Reiji's head and then bent it straight back.

His neck bones were just on the verge of breaking, hurting like it would be ripped right off to dangle there. His spine reached its limits, creaking.

To Reiji, this body formed of mist was like a balloon, so to speak.

He compressed mist into his formless self to force it into the shape of a human. Once it was broken, the contents that were Reiji's mist would spurt out violently—that wouldn't be so bad normally, but now that he was worn down and wounded.

When his neck was ripped away and popped off. Everything might scatter... and he might disappear.

I might not...be able to go back.

But even so.

"I am...human!!"

No matter how injured he was, no matter what pain he was in, the Phantasm's narrative would not be damaged.

While knowing it was no use, the dog's fangs would not let up, and the struggle continued.

Pop!

"Gah...geh...goh...!"

Another big clap. His target that time was not Reiji's neck. It was his torso.

His organs were twisted. Wrung. Like a rag. His ribs broke. Everything below the waist started pointing straight backward.

This was not an attack. It was torture. In a battle between Phantasm and

Mythic, the various attacks coming to nothing had proven that there was no point in injuring the body. What was necessary was to crush the opponent's will, to destroy their narrative.

Immortal. Absurd. A monster that could never be defeated.

So long as they were perceived that way, neither could be defeated. So then to destroy that, to injure and cause pain—and continue to toy with the opponent until they feared pain more than death—that was the essence of a battle between one narrative and another, between Mythic and Phantasm.

“Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Rrr...aaaaa?!”

A line of black mist was sucked into the rag wringer's gaping nostrils.

Diving inside, which had the same structure as the human body, the mist immediately materialized. Stabbing sensitive membrane with sharp thorns, he churned it around into a mess. The mushroom-cut head swayed violently side to side.

Agony, agony, agony, agony, agony.

Reiji's body was just about twisted off, entrails and all. The jaw of a massive wolf had bitten half the body of the Phantom in briefs, and thorns churned and ground around from his nostrils to his skull, even reaching his brain.

Their agony became intertwined. It twisted. Stabbed. Broke. Bit.

Alternating and alternating, just as if both had promised it, without ever backing down.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Rrr...a...hee...?!”

For the rag wringer, who had just about entirely become a Phantasm, it was impossible.

Reiji's murderous shriek, his human emotion bared, made the horror movie-esque Phantasm waver.

Just the slightest flinch. Shrinking. Fear. The will that was merely protected by

a flimsy background story was overwhelmed.

“...!” The rag wringer let up the pressure.

Right before he could twist Reiji’s torso right off, the Phantasm prioritized escape.

Instead of slipping away from the fangs that bit into his arm, the Monochrome Mist Technique Savage Black Fang, he just let it be torn off.

“...Like hell you’re getting away!”

“Kee-kee-kee-kee-kee-kee!” The mocking chuckle.

With his whole arm to his collarbone and halfway across his chest chomped right off, the flesh was already regenerating.

The Phantasm turned his back and tried to get away, but...

Right after he turned away, he took it right in the nose, in the face that was gushing blood that very moment from getting his brains churned around.

“Sorry, partner.” Getsu grinned boldly. Reiji recognized that smile clearly, even when he sported a long snout covered in fur.

In his burly hand, he clasped a beer bottle. He’d smacked that black glass bat straight into the Phantasm.

“This’ll end it!!”

“Raguhh...?!”

The sound of smashing glass.

The beer bottle that the werewolf Getsu Raisan had slammed him with shattered, and countless shards stuck in the Phantasm’s head.

There was no time to squeeze his eyes shut, and blood and clear fluid spilled from the glass shards to stick in his eyeballs. This time for sure, his nose was completely crushed—the Phantasm fell straight backward, tongue lolling out as he collapsed on the spot.

“Geh...geh, gehhhhhh...!!”

His limbs twitched like a bug on the verge of death.

Those were not conscious movements, but reflexive reactions. The broken flesh did not heal right away like it had before, and the Phantasm fell, as if he had taken the damage from getting hit with the beer bottle as is.

“That hurts like hell for real, huh? That’s what it smells like, monster.”

“Rrr, rrr, rrr...?! Wh...wh—wh—why?!”

“I dunno, and I doubt you do, either. But that girl... Kei told me.” He tossed aside the broken beer bottle. New bottle in one hand, he smacked it into his opposite palm.

With that threat, the werewolf looked between his beaten-up partner and the fallen Phantasm.

If that’s the monster from the story.

Why not beat him like in the story?

That was Kei’s flash of insight, on hearing the hint that Narasaki had proposed, and she’d instantly derived that answer.

“The original version of your story, the logs of the original BBS posts—those were important. There was no meaning in the stuff that was added after—the single pair of briefs, the weird hair, or the telekinetic twisting attack.”

Those were inessential. They were no more than supplementary details.

But how the Phantasm had originally been established, what had been posted at first had been someone with bad manners getting severely punished, causing him to fall into a frenzy and attack that person’s friend, the tale of a trivial violent incident.

The rag wringer couldn’t escape from the proof of that punishment—the trigger that was the strike from a beer bottle.

“Hyee...?! ”

“Hey, Reiji. This guy’s scared.”

“Yeah. Getsu, can you give me one, too?”

Showing clear hints of panic and fear, the rag wringer crawled along persistently.

Stepping on the white briefs, Getsu tossed one of the beer bottles he had brought out from the bar to Reiji. Bleeding all over and battered and wounded, the boys smiled at one another.

“Eh...eh-eh?”

Gripping his bare neck, Getsu made the Phantasm stand.

The unsightly face, smeared in blood from his nose. Embarrassment, looking like an ingratiating smile, rose on the Phantasm’s visage.

No, that was no longer a Phantasm. In submitting to violence, tasting pain— He was a fallen Phantasm, human again.

““Hyah!””

The two of them got him at the same time, from the front and back.

The full swings from Reiji, as a human again, and the werewolf Getsu crashed into one another.

The two beer bottles broke, hitting the thing that had been the Phantasm in the head, smashing and scattering.

*

“When a Phantasm has just been born, it seems immortal and invincible. However— “There are also clear defects. They’re too deeply influenced by stories.”

Even as the swirl of fire cleared, the speaker looked down over the smoking street.

The ruins of the neighborhood. The man landed lightly on the roof, which was close enough for heat to still transmit through the bottoms of his shoes, reaching into his jacket with a slick gesture to pluck a thin wand like a conductor’s baton.

“The BBS logs that Neru looked up—those are the root of the urban legend called the rag wringer. What was just an act of violence by a drunkard became a Phantasm through that post—if that didn’t exist, then the story would vanish, too.”

The details added after the fact were meaningless.

The rules that the Phantasm rag wringer truly had to follow were only those of that first post.

Therefore, what had turned a human into a Phantasm in the post—the beer bottle that the drunk man had struck him with—was the way to kill the Phantasm. It was the weakness that many monsters were designed to have, an equivalent exchange for strength and fear.

“It’s completely different from old Mythics like Reiji, beings who have even been forgotten from legends, or Mythics like vampires that have been supplemented and rewritten through various media. A Phantasm that’s only just been born, freshly established, isn’t convincing enough to be able to deny those weaknesses.”

Like a vampire who could take plenty of sunlight and enjoy sunbathing.

The Phantasm didn’t have the history, the accumulation of characters depicted deviating from the lore.

Known by a limited number of people, this particular, shallow Phantasm had been established by localized excitement.

Since he could not fight the weakness of the story that had made him...

“Someone who broke the rules gets punished, and from that fear, a twisted sense of justice goes out of control. The rag wringer is a modern allegory. Fearing being punished once more, he attacks others excessively.”

The man toyed with the wand. The president of Fantastic Sweeper, Narasaki, laid the sole of his brand-name shoe on the edge of the roof and looked down over the town.

There, the Phantasm person—what had once been the rag wringer—was twitching and squirming as the werewolf and Brocken were kicking him with their toes to check if he was breathing.

“It makes me remember the punishment that was once given to Justice Man... the monster that anyone could become. Even if the person who took the Tonic didn’t know, once the wound embedded into the Phantasm’s origin was brought back—then it would hurt like hell, wouldn’t it?”

The former Phantasm twitched after getting kicked in the side. Startled by that, Reiji and Getsu backed up.

The high school bunny girl with short white hair ran up to them. Narasaki inclined his ears to the conversation between her and the two boys.

Normally, you would never be able to hear that far. He waved his wand to faintly draw some characters, and a pale light was emitted from the end of the wand to melt into the air, upon which he could clearly hear their conversation.

“...Is he dead?” asked the high school bunny girl.

“We tried kicking him, but he’s still alive. He’s stubborn,” said the werewolf.

The man in the briefs spasmed, unconscious from the agony.

They surrounded that which had been the Phantasm, now completely unconscious.

“Let’s ask the parent company to retrieve him. We’ll need to clean the scene, t—!”

The conversation crumbled apart right there.

Reiji, who had only just joined in, collapsed to his knees while hugging himself, clenching his teeth.

He had gooseflesh all over and was turning to gas, spewing smoke that melted into the air. Stains like burns rose here and there on his skin, and his hair was growing shorter, just as if he were being burned by invisible flames.

“Ngh...!”

“H-hey, Reiji?! Are you okay?! Take your Tonic, hurry!”

“Yeah... But.”

While bearing the pain, he searched in his pocket. Inside the special case he opened was an ampoule of the drug and the needle-less syringe.

He broke the long and thin tip with trembling hands and transferred the contents into the syringe. Now if he just pressed it to a place where his skin was thin, then the fluid, discharged at high speed, would open an ultrasmall hole in the skin, and it would be absorbed without losing a drop.

With the empty bottle in his palm where the stains were spreading, Reiji paused for a while.

“Hey, Getsu.”

“Huh? Inject yourself first—”

“What do you think is going to happen to him?”

The rag wringer, with his head smashed. Having the weakness in the story struck, the wound did not heal, and he wasn’t moving anymore.

He wasn’t dead. If he healed, then they wouldn’t be able to deal with him. How long until he recovered? They didn’t even know if it would take half a day, or a full day, or if they could buy a week—or if he would stand up abruptly after just a few minutes.

Restrain him while he was incapacitated? That was no use. No physical restraints would work on a Phantasm.

Just kill him? If they hit him over and over with beer bottles, he might die—but.

“Won’t they hand him to the company? Well, I’m sure there’s no way he’ll be treated like a normal criminal,” the werewolf answered dutifully, while scratching the thick hairs of his cheek with the claws on his fingers.

“I dunno if we can get a proper testimony—I guess they’ll hit him with a beer bottle every time he wakes up. I dunno, but if we leave it to the higher-ups to think about it—”

“Yeah. So then,” Reiji agreed with Getsu’s conjecture. That was how things would go, typically speaking.

There was no way to restrain the Phantasm. Capturing him at all would be risky. If you weren’t going to kill him, then...

“This is the best answer.”

“Huh?!”

Reiji injected the syringe into the neck of the Phantasm as he lay there after being kicked.

“Geh, g-g-g-geh...gerf?!”

Making sounds like he was going to puke, he writhed, scratching at his throat.

The color returned to his skin, and his eyes, which had looked like abnormal black holes, changed into normal ones. With an effect so immediate it was unusual, the wonder drug Human Tonic, which made Mythic Beasts human, worked as an antidote to the Phantasmified human.

“Geh...ah...?”

His broken forehead and the glass shards stuck in him looked painful, but now he was just a gangster-looking man.

“Kasumi?!” cried Kei. “...Why?! Why would you give him the drug...?!”

The empty syringe passed through his evaporating arm, falling to lie at their feet.

The nasty-colored stains all over Reiji’s body spread as if he were toasted by invisible flames, and the rising smoke got a nasty smell like a crematory, like proteins disintegrating.

“You...goddamn idiot! What’s the point of saving someone like that?! He’s never gonna thank you, you know?!”

“That’s not what I’m after. And I can get more of my drug if I go back to the company.”

Even as he was burning, there was no wavering in Reiji’s voice.

That was his steel reason—the will that kept a Mythic Beast human.

But despite proving that strength, he couldn’t stop his body as it headed toward destruction.

“His testimony will be necessary for our investigation moving forward,” Reiji said. “I will fulfill the job I accepted.”

“Reiji...!!” Getsu was speechless.

The source of the impossible Phantasm Tonic that this culprit had ingested was most certainly the same as whoever had given the Mythic Tonic to the hit-and-run centaur, Mai Ikeda—so then.

“If we can’t get a testimony from him, then we’ll be stuck,” Getsu said. “But still, this is too dangerous!”

“Maybe.”

“The hundred million reward won’t do you any good if you’re dead! What’re you thinking, idiot?!”

“It’s not an issue of money. The funds are proof of trust. She—Mei paid us the compensation for her future as is. She entrusted half of what she lost in the accident to us. So then we have to produce corresponding results.”

Hss, hss, hss, hss. With his skin melting, and even the flesh become smoke, he said, “I will prove that we’re human—to qualify us as members of society, normal... Sorry, but I’ll be counting on you.”

“...!! ...We’re going back to the office; grab hold!” Getsu tried to help Reiji up.

But the hand he grabbed abruptly crumbled into nothing.

“Huh...your hand?! Are you okay? Doesn’t it hurt?!”

“No.” It was just like incense ash. His form held its shape as it burned out, but when touched, it crumbled easily.

“It doesn’t...hurt...?” The flesh that peeked out from his evaporated skin was dry and white, cracking into pieces and crumbling.

“This is bad!” said Getsu. “At this rate...you won’t last until you get another shot!”

“Hold on a moment! Don’t move! Please, stop!” Her face on the verge of tears, Kei stopped Getsu as he was about to grab Reiji’s torso, which had yet to crumble.

The syringe lay on the ground, after having injected all the contents into the young former rag wringer.

Seeing that there was just a little leftover remaining in the container, less than a drop, Kei said, “...This is going to be nasty.”

“Of course this is nasty... Wait, hey?! The heck’re you doing?!”

She took the needle-less, empty syringe and put it to her lips, sucking up the

tiny amount of the drug that remained. “But it tastes familiar. Surprisingly normal, the same as the market product...I think.”

Licking what remained on her tongue to sample it, Kei experienced a change in the way her eyes looked.

Her fear and agitation stopped right there—quickly and abruptly, like the sky suddenly calming during a storm.

“So...the base is the same, after all. They aren’t using any special catalyst. Since it’s the Human Tonic, of course they’re using something from humans... Blood? A smell like soy sauce... It’s probably hair.”

“I—I dunno what you’re talking about,” Getsu stuttered. “What’re you doing? Gimme a break! Have you lost your mind?”

“No. I don’t know where the company office is, but he won’t make it, even if you carry him to where the drug is.”

She swallowed that drop of Tonic, as if confirming how it would feel to swallow.

“I might be able to do something with this. Help me!”

“Huh...? I dunno what you mean, but if it’ll save Reiji, then I’ll do anything!”

“You don’t have to do anything. Buy some stuff—a big glass and stir stick that can mix it around properly! Worst case, throwaway chopsticks will work. Also a shaker and Monster Tonic, red and green!”

“O-okay!”

At the nearby izakaya from which staff and customers had fled, he gathered what they needed.

She poured the water from a plastic bottle bought in a vending machine into a dingy glass. Opening the pull tab on a Monster Tonic from the same vending machine, she took the fizzing carbonated drink and— “Ah, sorry! A measuring cup! If you don’t have that, a tablespoon and a teaspoon!”

“That’s a lot of demands! Um, uuuumm!!”

“...”

“Hurry up! He looks like he’s going to burn right up!”

Getsu returned to the kitchen in a panic.

Beside Reiji, who was sitting down and looking like he would fall apart at any moment, she accurately measured the red and green carbonated drinks—the chemical color of the cheap syrup itself—and poured it into glasses.

One and a half cups of red and one cup of green. She took a lick of that lightly mixed substance. “...Not quite right. Get me some milk, powdered or fresh, or even coffee creamer is fine!”

“That would work?! Hey, if we have that much time, shouldn’t we just carry him—” The werewolf was so worried that he had question marks all over his face.

“No. Absolutely not. I’ll make sure you won’t regret this. So,” the high school bunny girl shot back coolly at him. “Please! I will save him!”

“Ngh...! Agh, man, fine! Hold on, Reiji, just a little longer!”

Getsu fished around in the kitchen a third time, and she poured in a little of the milk he found.

Kei stirred it a bit with a stick. The red, green, and white mixed up to a color like mud.

And then the final secret sauce—

“Hey, sorry.”

A hair she’d plucked out from a head. It seemed it had belonged to the mushroom-cut man himself.

When she tossed in that which she’d gained from the former Phantasm who had only just returned to human— “See. When you mix it like this, the color changes.”

“Whoa, you’re right! It looks gross! And...it stinks! It really stinks like hell!!”

It was sour and salty and milk-smelling. It was a dull color that could be described as rotten koumiss.

The reaction was impossible to get from just juice and milk mixed up, and it

made Getsu, with his sharp sense of smell, grab his nose and gaze at the glass emitting the nasty stench.

“...It’s based on the hair of a pervert? That’s really gross... We can’t go with mine or your hair?”

“Yours won’t work. Mine right now wouldn’t, either.”

Even Kei Kakiba herself couldn’t understand why it would get like this.

Just with a single lick, she’d been able to understand. She’d managed to reproduce it. She could make it. That was it.

The true nature of the secret that had enabled the establishment of the girls bar filled with nothing but bunny girls.

“You need material from the animal that’s the model, or you can’t make Monster Tonic.”

She poured the dull liquid into the stainless steel shaker. Put in a cube of ice.

Just like a skilled bartender, she shook, shook it up with a pleasant *chaka chaka* sound.

The crack of ice breaking inside. With some air in it, the agitated two types of Tonics and the catalyst melted and mixed.

“It’s done. Drink it!”

“...?!”

“What, you don’t want to? This is life or death here, so hurry and drink!”

Not even wanting to waste the time pouring it into a glass, she brought the shaker to Reiji’s lips, which had been crumbling even as she was doing the work.

A pungent stench wafted up. It could be described as middle-aged man juices. It was the bathwater of ten middle-aged men, plus the fermented smell of the propagation of some kind of bacteria. It was nasty, even if he was on the verge of death.

“You’ve got no choice. Suck it up,” said Kei.

“...?!”

Just like the close of a stage play, she helped Reiji up from a lying position.

Despite being on the verge of extinguishment, disgust came to his face reflexively. The high school bunny girl poured the contents of the shaker in her own mouth, tugged up the boy's jaw, and lightly pressed her lips over his.

"Mmngh?!"

"...!!"

Her tongue went into his closed lips. She forcibly poured in the mystery fluid, and an intensely unpleasant taste fell into Reiji's throat.

"Wh...whoa..."

With a disturbed expression on his face, the werewolf gazed at the pair as they were locked in a kiss for a while.

The minute or so they spent frozen there, the boy spasming, his cheeks firmly locked in a kiss as the girl continued to send the drug down the back of his throat, was a bit too forceful to call a love scene, but...

"Whoa...for real? Reiji, you're healing, you're healing!"

The color returned to the hands that had been burning out, the scattered particles taking form. The lost hand instantly regained its form, and the cracks and burn-like stains all over his body closed, regaining their original shape.

It was just like a fairy tale. Cinderella, kissing the sleeping prince— "*Kah!* ... What the heck...?! Kakiba, hey! You're...my first...!"

"It's okay. It's my first time, too, but it was nothing. It was to save your life."



“Is that something the one who does it should say?! Well, it’s true you saved me... But I’m not happy about it...!”

“You’re red up to the ears. Are you okay; do you have a fever?”

“...That’s not it. Please, just leave me alone...!” Reiji let out a deep sigh, then moved around to make sure he’d been restored.

He closed and opened his palms, checking the movement of his fingers. There was no problem, though he was still exhausted. His physical wounds had all healed perfectly—it felt miraculous, even.

That can’t be... Just how much do you think the company charges for one capsule of Human Tonic?

It was more than a month’s worth of a normal office worker’s salary. Working for Fantastic Sweeper, since he could make use of the company discount, it was reduced by quite a bit—but the daily burden was so great, he spent just about all his pay on it.

“No way,” said Reiji. “You made that...with the Monster Tonic sold on the market and some random ingredients?”

“Dude...” Getsu was awed. “And wait, why? How can you do something like that?”

The Specials’ eyes were wide with surprise.

But her long rabbit ears bounced.

“I love drink bars.”

“...Does that have something to do with it?”

“It does. I take my younger brothers and sisters from the care home to treat them sometimes. You can get refills, so everyone gets excited and drinks a bunch, but they gradually get sick of it.”

“Well... I guess they would.”

“For sure.”

Getsu and Reiji seemed to have memories of doing something similar themselves, and their comments made Kei nod with satisfaction.

“Times like that, I would often make mixes of different kinds of juices. Sometimes the kids would blend weird stuff, and it would taste strange, but it was fun.”

“...So?”

“Mine tasted the best. Basically, that’s what this is.” She proudly puffed out her modest chest.

For a few seconds, the Beastmen froze, waiting for her to continue.

“No way... That’s it?” said Reiji.

“That’s it. You have a problem with it?”

Her smug look didn’t stop, and realizing that was it, they were dumbfounded.

“There’s lots of problems!” Getsu cried. “That’s not an explanation!”

“It is! I’m good at mixing!”

“Being able to make some mystery drug by mixing juice is beyond just good!!”

“...”

Beside Getsu and Kei as they quarreled, Reiji, the one who had been saved, had a look like he was dealing with a toothache. “If you’re good at it, then couldn’t you do something about that nasty taste?”

“Sorry about that. Normally I would mix in cola or something, though.”

“Is it okay to stir in something like that?” asked Getsu. “He’s not gonna get some weird effects?”

A blank look. A look on her face like she hadn’t even considered that, Kei Kakiba blinked.

“Huh? Of course not. It’s a drink.”

“Well, it’s clearly not, though.”

While listening to that exchange from the top of a high-rise, their boss, Narasaki, muttered, “That’s witchcraft...the hidden spell, or ‘hidey’ that was lost due to the oppression of ancient times. It’s the same high-level mysticity that the parent company is trying to reproduce. But even with a government-scale

budget, they can't come up with anything more effective than Monster Tonic."

"Never mind that—I want you to close the window you left out of. It's cold."

"Hold on there, Neru. Can't you understand how amazing this is...?! This is an outstandingly gifted person—if she were a caster at the company, they'd instantly make this a sample for permanent preservation. This is a super-rare item that we absolutely must not lose."

"Does it have anything to do with the job?"

"Good grief," Narasaki said, shoulders slumping.

His secretary, who looked like nothing other than a little girl in a suit, was not there. Instead, the pigeon sitting on his shoulder spoke in the exact same voice, reproducing her cold look. *"In the first place...if she's a magus, then she's just like you. Not rare. Not unusual."*

"It's true you can call us similar... That's like saying humans are primates; in other words, we're monkeys."

A familiar. Its senses connected to its master as a living communication device, the bird was affiliated with the Fantastic Sweeper office.

Tickling its throat, the mage who lived in the modern era smiled faintly.

"Principia by Newton dismantled the laws of the universe mathematically. If werewolves and Brockens are forgotten Mythics, then we are the Mythics that have been denied."

"I don't care. You talk about yourself whenever you get the chance."

"Don't say that; listen. In a world where magic has been denied and the faith that is science dominates, we occultists very much feel our inferiority. Even though we make use of ancient relics that have endured for thousands of years."

After lightly stepping on the broom handle lying at his feet, it jumped up.

It was an outdated stick of wood that, at a glance, seemed like it would be used for yardwork. But it did a little loop in the night sky, floating about four inches over the ground, following which it fully supported the body weight of the man who leaped onto it.

This was the reason that President Narasaki had been able to rush over to the scene right after hanging up on the call with Getsu, literally hurtling out of the company building's window. It was a mystical tool: the wood of a thousand-year-old giant tree as its core, the sacred tree bundled with the tendons of a dragon's heart.

"The most I can do is fly and cause some minor miracles. You know?"

A magical broomstick. Riding that which was spoken of in fairy tales and fantasy, the man slid through the sky.

His high-class brand-name leather shoes merely sat lightly on it, and his narrow footing did not sway.

It felt as stable as if he were standing on a transparent glass floor. In the business district, with flames and smoke rising from the road and vivid remains of destruction, groups of Beastpeople were in a panic trying to escape as fires spread all over the place.

"This town is special. It's just like Walpurgisnacht—all sorts of people gather, all of them drinking witches' brew, becoming beasts to enjoy a night's banquet. It's as if a chaotic magical ceremony just like the Sabbath goes on and on."

He held the wand in his fingertips. A pale light like a firefly lit on the end of the conductor's baton.

"In this town, like a seething witch's cauldron, even Mythics that have been denied can be born again."

He lightly waved it, and it *hummed* a characteristic sound, like the laser sword being swung in a science fiction movie. Trails of light drew characters in the air, and the liaison for denied Mythics, the modern magus, cast a spell.

"Ri-parare."

The characters he'd drawn burst like fireworks and scattered.

The shattered rubble, the burnt remains, the broken glasses and flung chairs, and even the tiles peeled off the wall.

They rattled a bit, then floated up just as if they were a giant living creature and set into motion. As if putting together a precise puzzle, transparent fingers

restored the broken town, the crumbled streets, and the ruined shop interior in the blink of an eye, and it regained its look of just a few minutes ago, as if it had always been that way.

“And well... At least the cleaning part is easy! Isn’t that amazing, Neru?”

“Honestly, it is convenient. I wish you’d keep your mouth shut and just do that,” came the exasperated remark from the secretary, Neru.

“I’m not going to be quiet. I must talk about it, or nobody will compliment me. Well, things that were completely burned up won’t go back to how they were before, but I can get about eighty percent of it back, so be thankful.”

He looked down to see Getsu restraining the former Phantasm in his briefs, and Reiji leaning on Kei’s shoulder.

Their voices wouldn’t reach him. But from how they were waving and jumping up, it seemed they were thankful.

“Yes, yes, that’s just perfect. Since I’m normally taking it easy, it makes them grateful when I do occasionally perform. There are only a few things in this world that can be solely solved by magic, after all.”

“Oh? I think it would cost quite a lot of time and money to do the same thing, though.”

“It’s the opposite. Spending time and money can get the same results as magic. What’s more, there’s no risk. Taking the risk to win over a demon, continuing beastlike ceremonies on and on, offering sacrifices—well, all those old-fashioned hassles can be omitted, and you can accomplish it with a credit card or smartphone.”

The Mythic Beasts were like a vanishing flame, overpowered by such magics of the modern day.

“We occultists and the supposedly extinct witches are rare creatures on the verge of extinction.

“Now then, the high school bunny girl who has inherited such things. We must take her into custody. Of course! Without telling our parent company! We will not be telling them!” Narasaki seemed quite worked up.

“Boss. You are quite legitimately creepy.” While the pigeon on his shoulder reproduced the cold remarks of his secretary, it casually said, *“By the way, Boss, there’s something burning over there, too.”*

“Huh, no way. You’re right, why?”

The broom turned around like the needle on a compass, and Narasaki shaded his eyes with a hand to gaze into the distance.

Black smoke and flames rose up farther away, along with the sound of a fire bell ringing. Underneath, different flames from the ones Reiji had caused blazed and flickered, swallowing up a certain building whole, scorching the night sky.

The sign written on the wall twisted from the heat and fell.

The neon sign smashed dramatically—and the name of Pink Press fruitlessly vanished.

*

The high school bunny girls bar, Pink Press, occupied what was called a pencil building—

It was a narrow row of four-to-five-story buildings on a small lot that was divided into multiple sections on a single parcel of land near the station. These all formed a commercial district, presenting the flowers that attracted money-carrying customers, rather than honey bees.

But the glory days had been fifty years ago. Fifty years since building, they had deteriorated, and though there had been some reinforcement a few times since then, with the property value reduced, the buildings had been sold to local entrepreneurs for cheap, and small-scale prostitution and dining tenants had come in.

Even in this lawless district, there were rules for business.

Unusual these days, the mixed-used building the man had owned, with businesses running since way back, had still maintained its fire-prevention system, emergency evacuation, and sprinklers. The building housed the girls bar on the first floor, and a lingerie pub, host club, and illegal casino and mahjong parlor on the second and third floors. So when the fire started, the tenants and customers all gathered outside to stare at the blaze somewhat leisurely.

“Ah, what a fire...”

“I heard there was some quarrel at the girls bar? Maybe that’s why.”

Maybe it was because it was someone else’s problem.

The Beastpeople who looked to be customers basked in the glow as if watching a spectacle, gazing up at the swirling flames of the building.

“The boss! The boss still hasn’t come out!”

“Idiot, it’s dangerous! With it burning like that, he can’t be saved!”

“Boss, Boss!”

The high school bunny girls who worked at the girls bar tried to go back into the building to look for their boss, but seeing how powerful the flames were, the onlookers stopped them, and they reached out tearfully.

Having left the shop on the orders of no one else but their boss, the Flemish giant, they had zero idea what had happened. They had just been shocked by the fire, come back in a panic, and realized he wasn’t there.

They were completely unaware that the benefactor they were trying to look for had been murdered in an attack by a Phantasm.

However, if they had noticed...

“We need not finish them off?”

“Unnecessary. There is no meaning in the killing of some ignorant harlots.”

From the alley opposite the street of the blazing building came two lowered voices.

Costumes—their eccentric attire could only be called that: old-fashioned comportment. If they were to walk openly down the main streets, they would either gather attention as cosplayers or be the source of ridicule, but here they were lurking deep in the darkness of the city.

Even the stray cats and rats, the insects that swarmed around the scattered garbage bags, did not approach those two shadows.

They were prevented by a clear circle of about one meter in diameter, what would be called a magic barrier, just like an invisible wall, hiding this strangely

conspicuous pair from the eyes of any onlookers or crowds.

“Not them. The rag wringer,” the figure spat with clear contempt—he looked like an innocent child.

In classical hakama pants and with crossed ankles, he dressed just like a child who served an aristocrat in ancient Japan. It looked as if his bare feet were touching the ground, but his plump feet were in fact floating slightly—and unsullied.

His beautiful face seemed elegant, even. But the words that came from those glossy, full lips were hoarse, ugly and grating as if from a man who was over a hundred years old.

“Even if he was a weak one, that’s an offering compatible with a Phantasm. It would be a mistake to let them capture it alive.”

“That’s no more than a vagrant. To express it in the modern tongue, a type of ‘gangster.’” The man facing the child wore black clothes. With his pure silk Japanese clothing that was clearly the finest tailoring, he wore fingerless gloves that did not match the rest of the outfit at all. His face was completely covered by a mask reminiscent of a theater stagehand. “He was of no import, one who met with me and was blessed with the elixir. Even if questioned, he knows no more than that.”

“Even his meeting with you would be a clue. There are no others with such an eccentric countenance.”

“Heh-heh. Unlike you, remaining so stubbornly unchanging since ancient times, this costume is ‘a fit,’ as they say.”

“Was that a costume of a famous writer of this generation? Ingratiating yourself with the mundanes; how deplorable.”

“It’s a rather fine one, I’ll have you know. Fingerless gloves are quite apt for drawing out talismans. And borrowing the form of someone famous in this time is convenient for avoiding curses.”

The child snorted in displeasure, glaring at the stagehand with snakelike eyes.

“You mean to ward off curses?”

“That I do. Let us call it the law of modern mysticism, ‘cosplay.’” His voice was like ringing bells, with a humorous tone.

“Enough with your nonsense!” The child’s shrill voice boiled with rage. With that cry, sparks scattered, and black hair stood on end.

With a shock like lightning had struck, the streetlights around them groaned and flickered as they lit.

“My, you’re angry? Have I gone to excess?”

“You most certainly have, you tripe. Depending on the situation, I might strike your head off your shoulders on the spot.”

“Don’t say that. Go back far enough, and the path of *onmyou* has been passed down through the generations by personages at the ‘bureau’ where it originates, I am told, in Karakuni—the mainland. Having inherited the most cutting-edge of the art, would you deny its continued transmission and use?”

“You’re always full of such quibbles. Truly, a glib talker... However...” Combing back his mussed-up hair as he swallowed his anger, the child said, “’Tis true enough that these so-called cutting-edge arts cannot be underestimated. That half-horse girl who was compatible with the old Mythic and the weakling who swallowed the modern Phantasm—to think the god-summoning rituals that ancient shamans would have spent their entire lives accomplishing could be fulfilled by a single injection.”

“Indeed. But they are ultimately improvised—they will not match the work of true casters who have received the teachings of past and present.”

“I need not your flattery.” Despite saying that, the child looked slightly mollified.

The stagehand listened to the sparks that burst at the scene of the fire across the street and the lamenting voices as he said, “It has been over a dozen years since the earlier epidemic—without the guidance of we who know the ancient times, the ignorant masses will not be enlightened.

“The dregs, the elixir that proliferates in this town of Sabbath; the strange drug that turns human into beast.” With a thump, he pulled out a drink can from one sleeve of his black outfit with the skill of a sleight of hand artist. “With

the Monster Tonic, we will revive the ancient mysticality and magic—and oversee the birth of modern and new Phantasms. The scheme of the witch who sits in those headquarters is coming beautifully to fruition. Is this not fine?”

“’Tis so. And understanding that, you would stand idly by? Even if you do bait the petty weaklings, the best you can do is add fuel to the fire.”

Embittered and vexed.

With a face that was those words manifest, the child groaned.

“Our dearest wish is the revival of onmyou. Some mere foreign magi have taken over the lands of the gods, Akitsushima, and now they behave as if they are the masters of all the mysticality, magic, and onmyou in this land. How could I turn a blind eye?”

“Ha-ha. You understand very well the humiliation of the people at the bureau.” Lowering his head in respect, the stagehand waved his fingers as if clearing away the town. “Thus far, the beast dregs have been underestimated due to ignorance. But once the masses learn that there is a mystic, Mythic elixir, they will inevitably be fascinated by it.”

“Will they seek it or struggle? How will you use the remaining two, Devotee of the Seven Treasures, Kashinkoji?”

With a wave of his hand, the man’s sleeve rustled to reveal a new Tonic.

Its design was different than the drinks. There were two plain-looking medical vials.

“There are two more of the truly strange drug that we have obtained from the foreigners’ stronghold—BT headquarters. The deeds and unusual powers of the killer of drunk men, the hit-and-run centaur, and the rag wringer will be told through the town, making this in great demand with the villains who struggle for hegemony. Now, then...”

Jingling and jangling, he toyed with the rubber-stopped medicine vials in his palm—just as if he anticipated and looked forward to the ripples that would spread in this town once this product was administered.

“Let us decide it at what they call an ‘auction.’ There are many who seek

hegemony in the Masquerade. Now then, just what price will it go for?”

Gleefully, gleefully.

The eccentric stagehand made that announcement, and then along with the child, he melted into the darkness of the alley and vanished.

*

“So you spent all night putting out fires and then came straight to school after that?”

“That’s what happened.”

“I’m really tired.”

“...”

The next day, early in the morning. On a bench in the warm vending machine corner that was along the way to Akanebara Municipal High School.

Mei Mezuki, summoned out by a private message via social media, said that to the trio—Reiji Kasumi, Getsu Raisen, and other one—who were leaning against each other like exhausted dogs, falling asleep.

They told her about what had happened, but it sounded so absurd, she didn’t feel like she’d understood it properly.

Kei Kakiba, who they had followed figuring she’d be a material witness, had actually been a victim threatened by the hit-and-run centaur, Mai Ikeda, and on top of that, they had been attacked while in discussion, leading to someone being killed and even a building set on fire.

“This is way too much violence,” said Mei. “...Is that normal, in the Masquerade?”

“Examples like this are rather rare,” Reiji answered.

The Masquerade was abandoned as a lawless district, and though acts of violence like altercations and fistfights were daily occurrences, there weren’t that many examples of ghastly crimes such as premeditated murders, shootings, bombs, or arson surfacing.

Even if turning into a Beastperson suppressed your rationality, the person inside was usually the respectable resident of a nation based on rule of law. The

morals ingrained through many years of education couldn't be shed that easily, and it wouldn't go as far as what you'd see in genuine and actual regions of poverty or conflict.

"It's almost certainly arson, though it'll never be reported," said Reiji. "We were fighting the fire all morning, and after school we'll continue investigating—but it's uncertain if any clues will remain."

"So you're going to keep going. You're not giving up?" said Mei.

"This is work. We'll continue until we legally receive the money from you."

"If it's dangerous, you can stop. What if I tell you no more?"

"Then we calculate the fee for investigation up until now and continue. Though all we'd get then would be our pay from the company."

"What? So in the end, you keep going anyway?"

"Since we're dogs. We don't have the right to choose the opponent to snap at." Battered and exhausted, Reiji smiled wryly, and Getsu nodded.

Whether there was a reward or not, what they would do was the same.

To participate in society and continue proving their worth—they could only keep on running earnestly.

"What happened to that guy who barged in? That pervert in briefs or whatever."

"We heard from the boss, and apparently Phantasm Tonic is far more serious than Mythic Tonic."

The Phantasm of the modern era, which contained rumors circulating in real time, was a newcomer, albeit wreathed in heavy mysticality.

It would grant powers no lesser to those of the ancient Mythic Beasts—but the price for that was great.

"After analyzing the centaur Mythic Tonic, it seems that it wears off after one night, and they turn human again," said Reiji.

"Since that idiot Mai would rage around for one night and then go to school the next morning... It does seem that way, yeah," Mei said.

“But the Phantasm Tonic is different. Once you inject it, it’s difficult to get it out of your system, and the odds are high that there will be severe aftereffects.”

“Is that a doctor’s opinion?”

“Boss’s opinion.”

“...Knowing it’s his opinion makes it sound pretty dubious.”

“I agree, but we have no one else to count on for this. For the moment, we injected him with Human Tonic and got him back to human form, but he’s basically beyond recovery. Whether we can get a testimony from him will depend on the results of his treatment.”

“What about his identity?”

“By comparing his face with authentication data, we should be able to figure out his citizen registration number. Then the odds are good that we can trace routes to learn his residence, where he visited, friends, *etc.* It’s a thin thread, but—”

It was just barely connected.

Once Reiji calmly brought his explanation to a finish, Mei took a little breath.

“Roger, then I can look forward to your future investigations. What’s with that girl? Kei Kakiba, right? She’s a mess.”

“It seems losing her benefactor has hit her hard. Though she was calm during the fight.”

“This sort of thing gets you once things are settled and you have the time to think. The sadness—and pain.”

“...True. But I’ve already cried plenty,” said Kei.

Her normally well-groomed hair was sticking up in places. Her uniform was also somehow dirty and smelled like sweat, tears, and fire-extinguishing fluid.

The high school bunny girl who had come straight from the Masquerade, aka Kei Kakiba. Even now that she was human again and changed into her uniform, her eyes were pitifully swollen from crying, with dark circles from exhaustion.

“The boss was a good person.” While looking back over the past, her deceased boss and the owner of the girls bar, Kei choked out the words. “Not just to me. He helped many girls who were struggling to pay tuition, and the pay was on the high side, even though business wasn’t great. He was the same way to all the tenants of the building he owned, so everyone was crying.”

“Everyone from the girls at the lingerie pub to the casino customers were in tears,” Getsu commented.

On seeing the burnt corpse that Getsu had carried out from the scene of the fire when he’d plunged into the flames, the evacuated staff had all rushed over, despite how horrible the body looked, to cry in sorrow.

Seeing the three of them solemnly remembering, Mei cocked her head.

“...In other words, he was a good yakuza?”

“Is that what he was?” said Kei. “I’m not sure. I don’t know anything about yakuza.”

“Well, socially speaking, he’d be yakuza,” said Getsu. “He was running sex work businesses.”

“I think he wasn’t,” said Kei. “Saying that everyone in sex work is a member of organized crime is prejudiced.”

“Urk...you’re right. I’m sorry.” Mei apologized surprisingly readily.

Getsu blinked at her with bleary eyes.

“What’s wrong, did you eat something nasty? You’re being really nice.”

“I’m not so mean that I’d say something harsh to someone the day after they had someone close to them die.”

“That’s surprising. So you can read the room sometimes...,” said Reiji.

“Of course I can. There’s such a thing as social grace. Or rather, I just feel awkward around her...” Mei was aware that she was fairly obstinate or, rather, could be an angry and out-of-control character, but she didn’t know how to handle Kei.

She’s just too pretty. She seems like she’d break if you touched her at all; it’s

scary.

Her face as she sagged into the bench was haggard. If you rolled a camera on that alone, it would be a scene in a tragic movie.

She was beautiful enough that you could film her that way—she had the allure of a *yuki-onna*, a snow spirit.

To hide such thoughts, Mei sighed and said, “Anyway, it is possible that you were attacked because I requested that you investigate. I can’t be acting selfishly when someone has died... I can’t apologize, either.”

“I don’t think that’s true... In fact, I’m sorry for calling you here. The truth is, I asked for it.” Seeing Mei let out the guilt that spread like lead in her heart, Kei stood from the bench.

Then she smacked her cheeks to pep up her tired body and took a deep breath. Steadying her breathing, the seriousness returned to her face—and Kei Kakiba bowed her head deeply to Mei. “I’m sorry... I couldn’t stop Mai.”

“Huh?” An amazed response. “What’re you apologizing for? From what I’ve heard, you’re not at fault for anything. It was just my stupid junior learning your secret and threatening you—and then getting high on a weird drug to boot. What are you apologizing for?”

She sounded angry. Her harsh tone made Kei’s back twitch.

Kei could tell she was seriously afraid. Mei came off cold and strong, but though her voice was restrained, the weight of her words like a blunt instrument was enough to strip away her show of courage.

“If it’s something like, ‘Well, I’m not at fault, but I’ll just apologize anyway,’ then you don’t have to apologize at all.”

“No. Honestly, I’m really scared of you. But I thought I should say this.” Even as she trembled slightly, Kei continued, not raising her head. “I think what she did was unforgivable. She did cause trouble for me, and I also resent her, feeling like she has some responsibility for the bar burning down and the boss’s death.”

“But,” Kei continued. “I don’t want to make her the only bad guy. If I’d screwed up my courage and tried to talk to you or some school staff... If I hadn’t

stayed silent because I was scared of my job being found out, then that might never have happened.”

“That’s just hindsight. There’s no way you could choose to destroy yourself to stop an idiot.”

“Maybe that’s true. But there was a possibility.”

Averting her eyes, turning away.

Living on pretending she didn’t know—she couldn’t stand that.

“I felt I had to apologize. You can resent me for being weak, and you can expose my wrongs if that brings you closure. You’ve gone so far as to spend a lot of money to chase this culprit, after all.”

“You want to make yourself a human sacrifice? That’s some guts.”

“I don’t think it’s anything that lofty... I just felt that I had to do it.”

“...!” The sound of her clicking her tongue rang out.

While watching them from a distance, Getsu, with a look like he had a stomachache, whispered to his partner, “We don’t have to stop them...? You don’t think she’s gonna hit Kakiba?”

“Don’t worry,” Reiji answered while opening the lid on a corn pottage that he’d bought from the vending machine.

“You think? She smells real angry, though. The smell’s strong.”

“Judging purely by body odor is a bad habit of yours, werewolf. Humans are a little more complicated than that—and besides.” A gulp of the corn pottage. For the price, there wasn’t that much, making it a luxurious breakfast replacement for him. “Mei gets mad a lot—but the question is who she’s mad at.”

...Smack!!

A painful-sounding noise. It was the sound of hitting a cheek hard with a palm, hard enough that it went red.

“Huh?”

“Ow...”

Kei lifted her face at the sudden sound, widening her eyes at the unexpected sight.

Mei had smacked herself with no mercy, no holding back, and still held her palm to her cheek.

“Um. Could it be you got the wrong person? I’m over here.”

“You’re right in front of me, so of course not. I wanted to do that.”

“Huh? ...Why?”

“Drawing a line for myself. I mean that I couldn’t stop that stupid idiot Mai before she committed a crime,” Mei said flatly as Kei was all in a fluster. “If I was going to be on her side, as her senior, then maybe I should have hit you. But that’s not right. That’s not being a real friend, and it’s gross.”

“...This is too deep in the feels, and I don’t get it.”

“Of course it is. If I could put my heart easily into words, then I’d become a novelist. With that hit just now, the small amount of resentment I had toward you is all written off. We come out even. Zero!”

“Huh...? Are you okay with that?”

“I’m telling you myself that it’s fine, so it’s fine... So here is where things really start.” In her wheelchair, Mei calmly lowered her head.

“I’m sorry my junior caused trouble for you. She basically dragged both you and the person who died into her mess. If I can apologize, then I’ll do so as much as I can.”

“Hey. But I’m the one who caused trouble...”

“Huh? What’re you talking about? I’m the one. I’m the wrongdoer, and you’re the victim.”

“...Is that right? But I feel like I’m in the wrong here—aren’t I?”

“Don’t you decide you can take it all on. You didn’t do anything.”

“If that’s the case, I feel like you didn’t really do anything, either... Am I wrong?”

It was a slightly comical sight. The two of them bowing at each other,

completely seriously.

Seen from an outside perspective, it seemed comical even, and then after they talked for a while...

“Which of us do you guys think is at fault?” asked Mei.

“Be honest with us,” said Kei. “Who should be apologizing in this situation?”

“...” Chuckling at the serious question from the pair, Reiji stood from the bench.

He searched his pocket. He stuck what little change he had, his meager fortune, into the vending machine unstintingly—*clunk*. “How about coming to an agreement like this?”



“So then at least don’t treat us. You’re poor,” said Mei.

“I think that’s precisely what makes it so valuable, in a sense. You can taste the poverty,” said Kei.

“Shut up, shut your face. Here, Getsu. This is for you.” Reiji tossed the other corn pottage he’d bought to his partner.

“Hey, thanks.”

Getsu, Reiji, Mei, and Kei. For some reason, the two boys and two girls sat in a row, drinking soup for a while.

“I still see that promise we made a while ago as being in effect,” said Mei. “Wanna go?”

“You mean to go look at clothes? Yeah, let’s go, let’s go!” said Getsu. “How about you, Reiji?”

“I’d like to say I don’t have the money, but I wouldn’t be able to take it if you wasted money because I let you go off somewhere... I’ll go.”

“Why don’t you come, too?” Mei said to Kei. “I know a place with nice sweets; let’s have a girls’ party.”

“Huh...? I’ve never done that before, but what sort of event is a girls’ party?”

“A girls’ party is a girls’ party. You buy cake and drink coffee—and chat while you keep the guys waiting.”

“...Wait. Where will we be waiting? Outside the café?” asked Reiji.

“You can be just barely inside. If you carry our stuff, then I could buy you a cake set.”

“With pleasure.”

“Ah, no fair! Me too, me too! I can easily carry about a ton!!” Getsu cut in.

Without realizing it, they’d reached a point where they could go on like that on the bench forever.

A modest way to enjoy their young years, having overcome sadness, anger, and various other things.

As if devouring a sweet green fruit—the wayward youths talked.

*

Sometime after that, a lot of things happened.

A large-scale conflict occurred in Natsukibara, in the Masquerade. Groups of a few dozen on Monster Tonic—armed Beastpeople—clashed on the main street in front of the station.

The panic spread into the station, and trains were temporarily stopped.

To clean up the scene, an emergency dispatch order was sent to Fantastic Sweeper, who were contracted by management.

Many Beastpeople of unknown identity were dead, injured to varying degrees, or missing.

There were 5 dead, and 132 injured.

Of those at Akanebara Municipal High School...

The death count is...three.

MONSTERHOLIC

CONFIDENTIAL

GLOSSARY

01. WORD

BEAST TECH

02. MEANING

A conglomerate that introduced great advances by making major contributions to the establishment of a disease control system, and then handled the development and sales of Monster Tonic. Their influence is immeasurable, and manipulation of public opinion on social media is their strong suit.

03. IMAGE



03. IMAGE

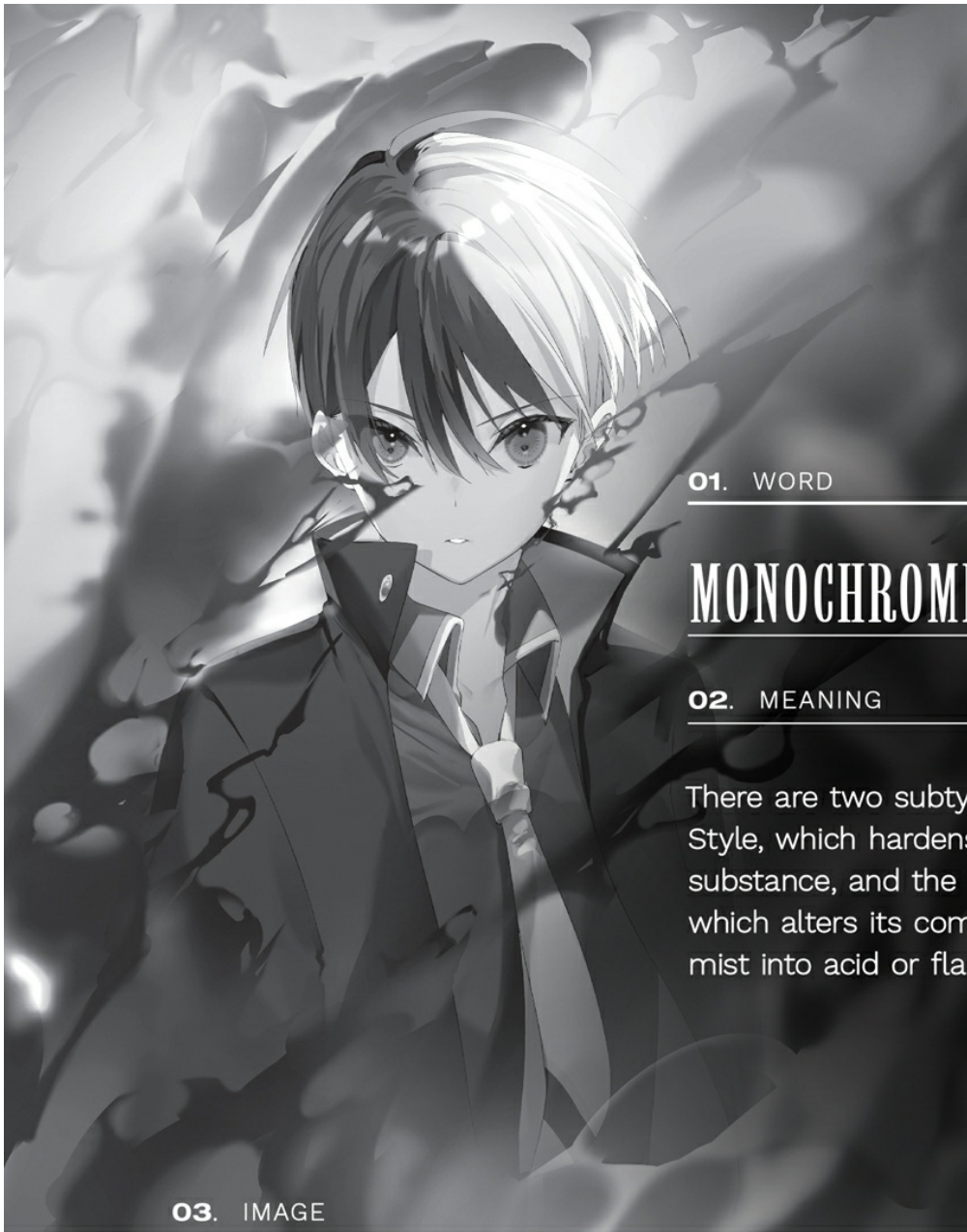


01. WORD

FANTASTIC SWEEPER

02. MEANING

A subsidiary of Beast Tech, responsible for preventing crime in the Masquerade, maintaining public safety, and street cleaning. Rumor says the company president is incredibly fishy.



03. IMAGE

01. WORD

MONOCHROME MIST STYLE

02. MEANING

There are two subtypes: the Black Style, which hardens mist to create substance, and the White Style, which alters its composition as mist into acid or flammable gas.

01. WORD

SOCIAL MANAGEMENT SUPPORT SYSTEM EYES OF GOD

02. MEANING

The people of Akitsushima are monitored twenty-four seven, 365 days a year by a system that makes use of social media and records their “credit score,” which indicates their level of social trust. Good behavior raises their score, while bad behavior lowers it.

Afterword

To all the readers, hello. I'm known as Ghost Mikawa. It's been about five years since I was last published with Dengeki Bunko. You might wonder if I had no contact at all with the editor at Dengeki during that time, but not so. That was just the way things went, and a lot of time passed in the process of thinking about what to do together and working out a novel.

And while we were taking so much time, lots of other books were printed for other labels, so at this point there are more people who won't know that I debuted with the newcomer's prize at Dengeki Bunko. I can't believe it.

Anyway, *Monsterholic* is, among my works so far, a story with particularly unique worldbuilding. It's the story of youths who go around solving incidents that nobody has seen before in a city of desires. I hope you enjoy it.

Following are the acknowledgments.

To Rag Miwano, the illustrator: I've been deeply moved to have you express the unique setting with your incredible illustrations. Each and every one of the characters in the story is attractive, and I was glad just to have you propose such amazing designs for Reiji in particular, which reflect his unique background as a mist monster. Truly, thank you so much. If this series can be continued, then I will be counting on you in the future as well.

To Ozaki Imari, in charge of concept art: Truly, thank you so much for depicting the scenery of the Masquerade and the rag wringer with such incredible punch. At the writing stage, the world still just had a vague outline and no more, so having you depict it so wonderfully has made me really realize, "Ah, so that's the kind of place the Masquerade was."

To my editors, Tabata and A: Thank you very much for always offering me fitting advice for the complex setting of this book. It's because the two of you have sympathized with the story of the boys racing through the city of desire

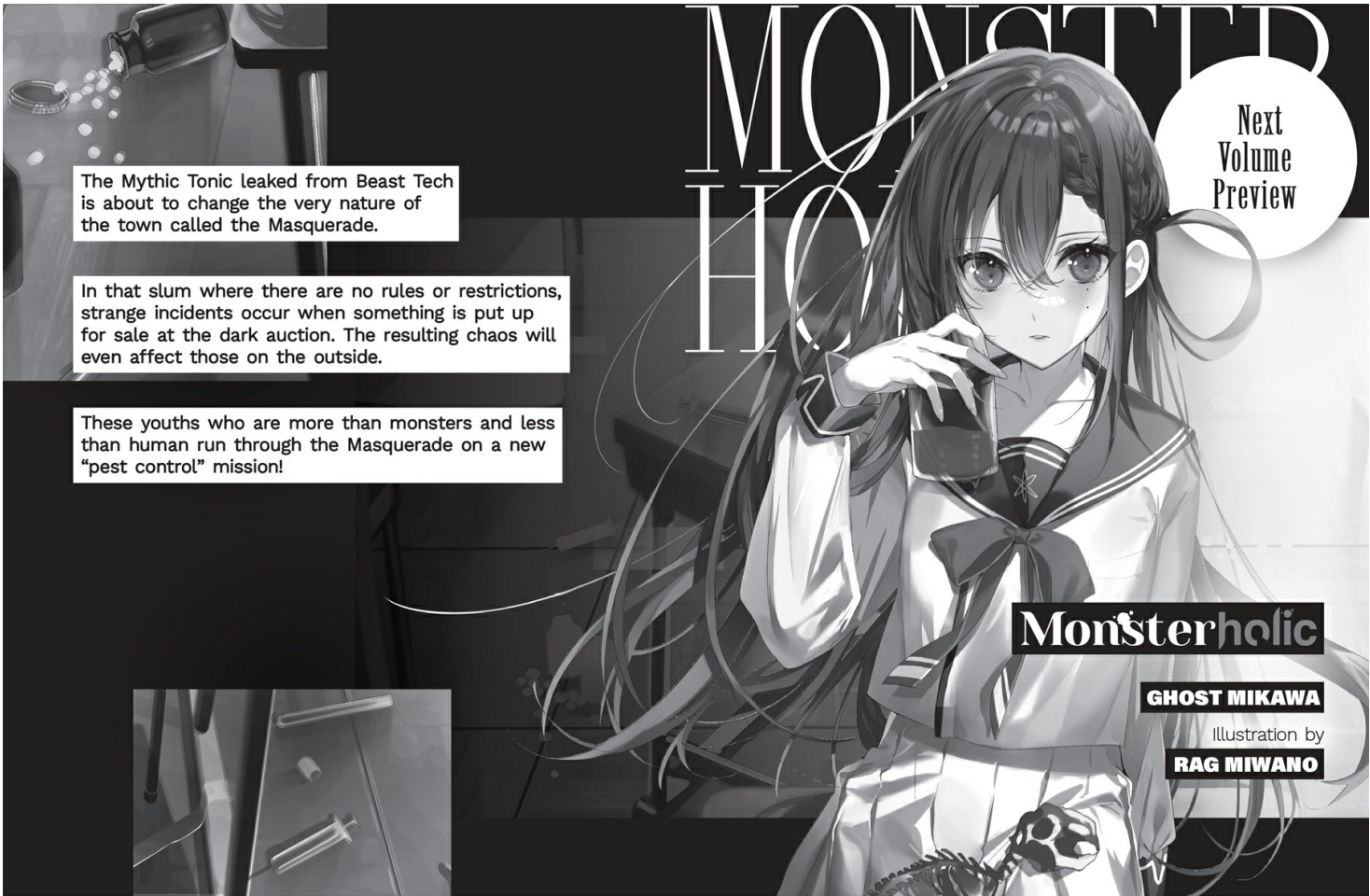
and enjoyed it as my first readers that I was able to have confidence and send it out into the world. Thank you.

To everyone involved in the publication of this work, be it business, advertising, printing, distribution, and bookselling: This is not limited to only this book, but it's because of all your work that books can reach the hands of many people. Thank you very much as always.

And at last, to all my readers who have picked up this book: Thank you so much.

Whether I can publish a sequel will be up to how much support this gets, so if you like this book, then I would be very glad if you share it with your friends or on social media to let people know about *Monsterholic*. Of course, I am also quite happy enough if you just enjoy it on your own.

And so, I'll end the afterword here. Let's meet again somewhere. This has been Ghost Mikawa.



The Mythic Tonic leaked from Beast Tech is about to change the very nature of the town called the Masquerade.

In that slum where there are no rules or restrictions, strange incidents occur when something is put up for sale at the dark auction. The resulting chaos will even affect those on the outside.

These youths who are more than monsters and less than human run through the Masquerade on a new "pest control" mission!

Next
Volume
Preview

Monsterholic

GHOST MIKAWA

Illustration by

RAG MIWANO

VOLUME 2

COMING SOON!

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