
MONSTER
Monsterholic
2
GHOST MIKAWA
Illustration by
RAG MIWANO
HOLIC


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Monster holic2

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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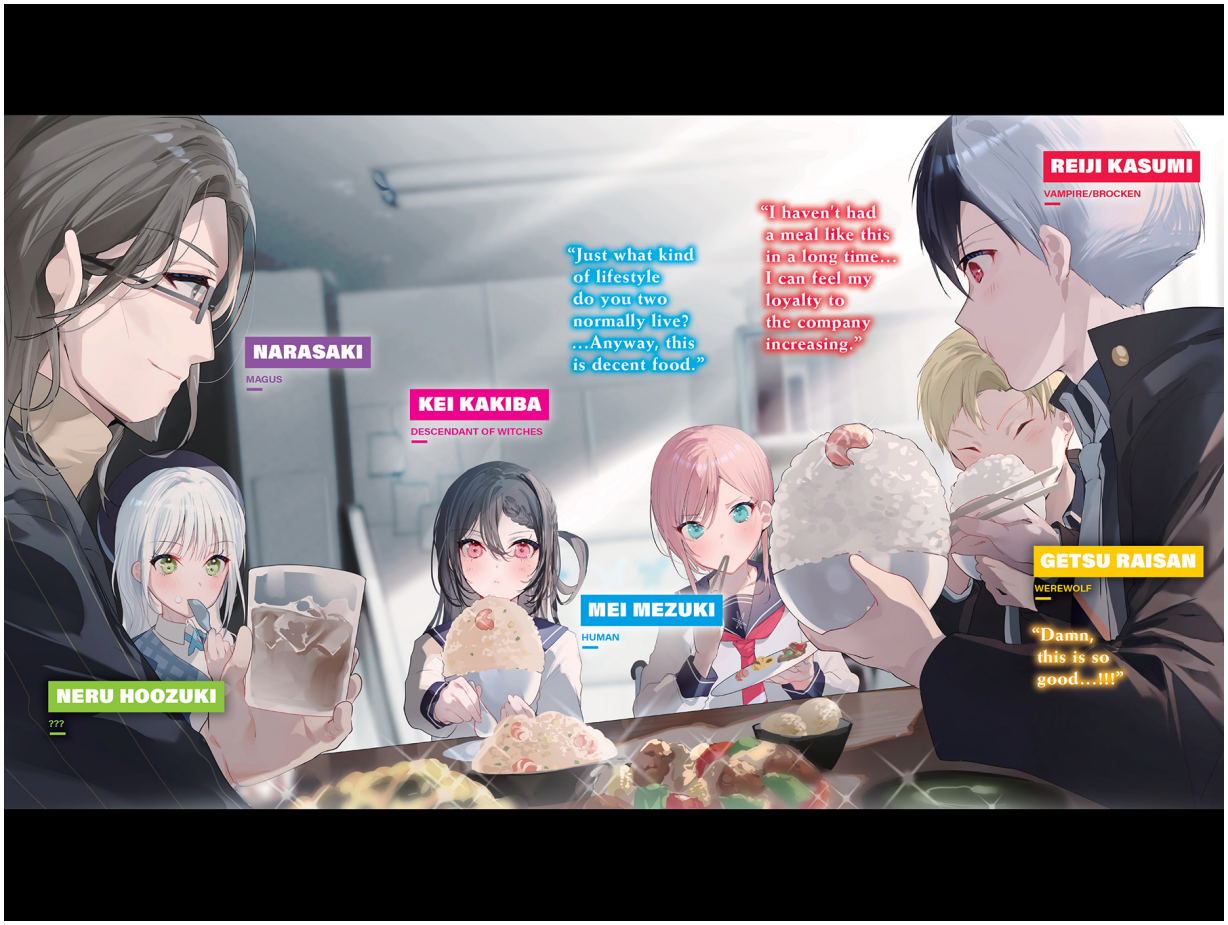
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Beast Tech Inc.

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

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


NARASAKI
MAGUS
KEI KAKIBA
DESCENDANT OF WITCHES
"Just what kind of lifestyle do you two normally live? ...Anyway, this is decent food."
"I haven't had a meal like this in a long time... I can feel my loyalty to the company increasing."
REIJI KASUMI
VAMPIRE/BROCKEN
MEI MEZUKI
HUMAN
GETSU RAISAN
WEREWOLF
"Damn, this is so good...!!!"
NERU HOOZUKI
???

Synopsis of Vol. 1

Part 01

The Masquerade—a place where people become beasts, releasing themselves from rationality to revel in freedom and anonymity. This is the sole **government-designated slum** in the country, where anyone can drink **Monster Tonic** to transform into a Beastperson and forget the oppression of their fully monitored society.

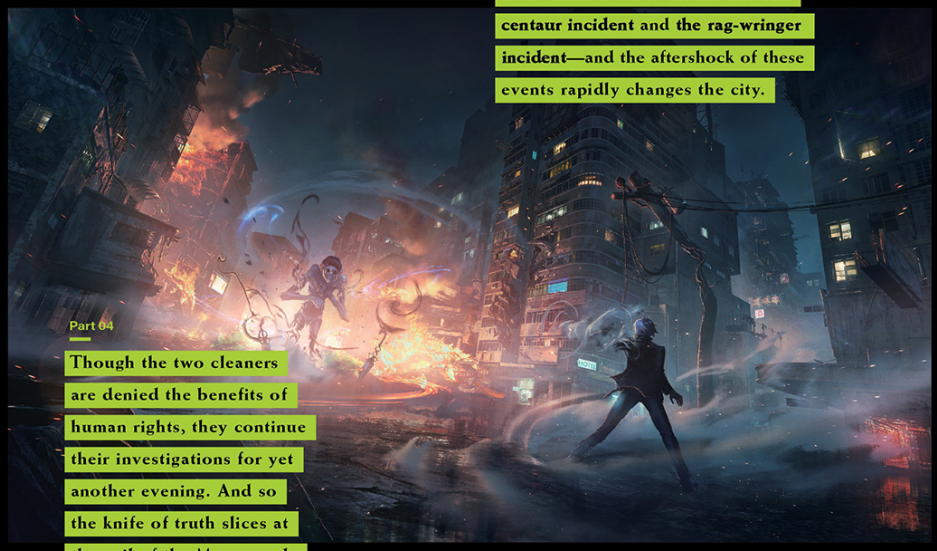
Part 02

Two boys are subcontracted as the city's cleaners, or "pest control." They are *real* monsters, the descendants of **Mythic Beasts**: Reiji Kasumi, a "**vampire**" Brocken, and Getsu Raisan, a **werewolf**.



Part 03

The leak of Mythic Tonic from Beast Tech leads to **the hit-and-run centaur incident** and **the rag-wringer incident**—and the aftershock of these events rapidly changes the city.



Part 04

Though the two cleaners are denied the benefits of human rights, they continue their investigations for yet another evening. And so the knife of truth slices at the veil of the Masquerade to reveal its secrets...

Concept art by Imari Ozaki

REIJI KASUMI & GETSU RAISAN
Special Permanent Beasts: Vampire/Brocken & Werewolf

Monsterholic



Monsterholic

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GHOST MIKAWA

Illustration by

RAG MIWANO

YEN ON

New York

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Monsterholic 2

GHOST MIWANO

Translation by Jennifer Ward ■ Cover art by Rag Miwano This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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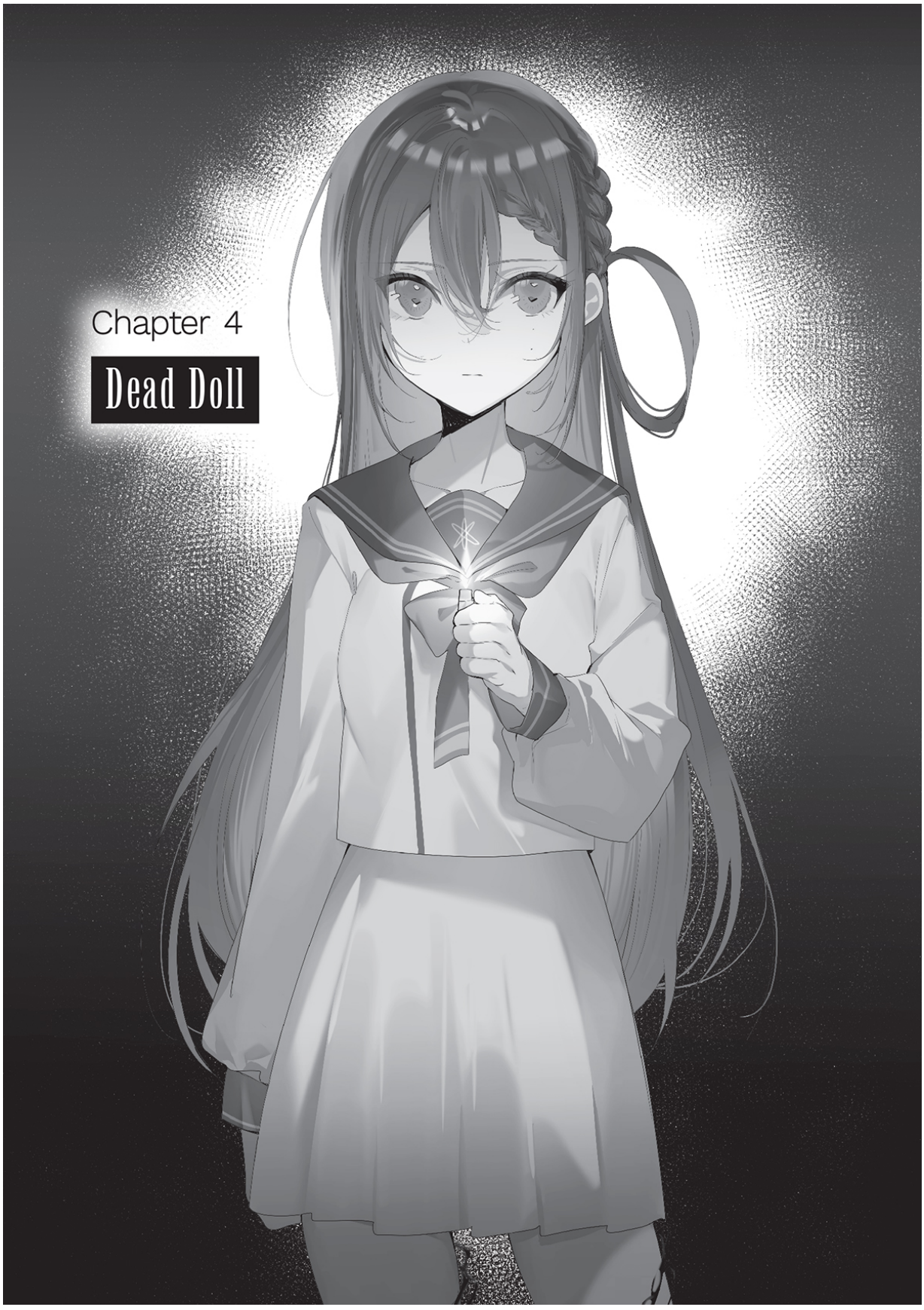
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter


Chapter 4
Dead Doll



It was the end of the month, payday, and the weekend.

In a drainage ditch on the side of the road, people experiencing homelessness gathered around rotting garbage piles that emitted methane and provided meager warmth.

The passing "tourists"—looking comparatively cleaner—eyed them like one would rare animals in a cage.

A group of Beastmen and Beastwomen in casual clothing—resembling a cross between herbivores, carnivores, reptiles, and human beings—were walking in a line, following a shepherd-like tour guide.

The place they were headed was a ten-minute walk from the entrance of the Masquerade, Natsukibara Station.

It was a high-rise apartment building near the old post office, once a high-class residence that had sold for a few hundred million yen per apartment.

The tourists filed into the fifteen-story structure, its entrance sparkling with gaudy lights and guarded by some stern-looking carnivorous Beastmen in black suits.

"Thank you very much for participating in the Masquerade Black Tower Casino tour today!" the guide announced energetically. An impressive customer service smile was plastered on his incredibly ordinary dog face. "Have any of you gambled before? It's so tightly controlled on the outside these days that you can only play with the most trivial stakes. But here, you're free to do anything!"

The group emerged into the lobby of the former high-rise apartment building. The fancy interior could be mistaken for that of a hotel, and there were signs everywhere.

"At the Black Tower Casino, you can bet to your heart's content on typical casino games and mahjong, plus a wide variety of board

and card games. But that's not all!"

The tourists murmured amongst themselves, and the tour guide performed as theatrically as a stage actor.

"The real draw at this establishment is the Dueling Ring, where you can gamble on Magicmon, Ten Piece, and all other sorts of trading card games! And if you hit it big, you can exchange your chips for cash or a host of rare prizes that are impossible to get on the outside. You've got nothing to lose!"

With the prices of rare trading cards soaring, people had started investing in the TCG market. Hardcore card game fans and speculators alike leaned forward in excitement to browse the casino's long list of prizes, which included high-value cards that would make any scalper or robber drool.

"Well then, everyone, please enjoy yourselves until it's time for us to return to the bus!"

"Wooooooooooooo!"

Suddenly unable to help themselves, the tourists let out a cheer, surging toward their gambling spots of choice.

There were many men but also some women on the tour. Though far from poor, the members of the group weren't exactly wealthy, either. They were middle-class customers who had come to this wild gambling den in search of thrills.

"W-w-w-wow! Matches in real life! This is my first time doing this offline!"

"That's nice and all, but have you seen the prizes?! There's an Ultra Five, and it's in perfect, near-mint condition!"

"A ten-million-yen coin…and a hundred-million-yen coin? I can't believe those things are even real."

Ignoring the customers as they dispersed into the casino, the dog-man tour guide let out a sigh, his tail drooping as he headed from the lobby to the back room.

Beyond just a single door, the decor shifted completely from the sparkling front hall to a damp hallway where old concrete walls were a testament to the many years that had passed since the high-rise had been built. The guide passed through the corridor and into an office.

“I showed in the tourists, Boss.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

The air was dirty, stiflingly hot, and choked with the smell of beast sweat and cigarettes.

The look of these Beastmen practically screamed *yakuza*—people involved in *illegitimate business*.

Gangsters with sweat beading on their foreheads were collecting fingerprint-covered banknotes that were scattered on the office desk. They shoved the cash into bill-counting machines and wrapped them with one-million-yen currency straps before packing the bundles tightly into a briefcase for transport.

“Wow… A real haul.” The tour guide drank in the sight.

The man he’d called “Boss,” who oversaw the gangsters, glared at him.

“Don’t get no funny ideas.”

“You don’t have to tell me. Don’t forget. I flushed the body of the part-timer who stole from us down the toilet last week.”

“Oh yeah! Speaking of, we’ve got a drum out back, so next time you can burn ’em.”

“I don’t think that’s the issue here. We can’t just toss them in with the trash headed for the incinerator, can we?”

“The cleaners are getting uppity. There’s nothin’ good to be earned by goin’ against management.” The boss smirked, the drooping skin of his bulldog face scrunching up around his squished nose. “There are loads of country hicks out there who wanna play. Ya get plenty just puttin’ together tours to bring ’em in. Oh, I can’t stop smilin’! Who could run some dull ol’ tourism gig after doin’ this?”

“Are you sure this isn’t a yakuza operation? ’Cause it sure as hell looks that way to me, Boss.”

“That’s the cost of doing business, pal. Ya gotta put up a tough front, or you’ll run into trouble real fast ’round these parts. We used to be a legit tourist business, you know. Blame it on inbound tourism dying.”

The global pandemic had caused a reduction in demand for travel, a devastating blow that had meant death for many

businesses.

With the money from overseas sightseers long since dried up, the tourist agencies that had been forced out of business inevitably discovered a means of survival in the Masquerade, acting as a go-between for illegal entertainment instead.

"I'm countin' on ya to run the prostitution tour tomorrow. The clientele's good since you'll be dealing with the wealthy, but they're all freaks. Pick places with girls who won't complain. You can tack on loads of extra fees."

"Gotcha. Man, we're raking in the dough, heh-heh-heh."

"Tryin' to keep things respectable has its perks. The guys who run the shadier tours send their clients into death games, ya know."

"So they actually run crazy shit like that…? Do death games make money?"

"Who can say? There are all kinds, like arena matches to the death, escape games with your life on the line, and rooms where you have to fuck if you wanna leave. Now c'mon. We've got our profits. Get off your asses and load this into the transport car!"

The briefcase was now stuffed with stacks of cash and securely locked.

Brawny Beastmen armed with nightsticks were both staff and security at this casino. In this lawless district, only violence could secure anyone's safety. There were countless criminals who would target establishments like theirs that handled large sums of money.

Even there at the Black Tower Casino, there were routes for transporting sales money to the "outside."

"Roughly a hundred million. Not bad earnings. Do this job right, and you'll all get a nice bonus."

"Yes, sir!"

The boss entrusted the briefcase filled with cash to his underlings. One was a stallion, a Beastman with excellent vision and a wary nature. Another was a bull, selling himself on toughness and muscle. Those two could handle any fistfight.

Finally, filling a brand-name suit to the brim with pure strength was the winner of the Beastman lottery: a gorilla.

Thanks to his thick muscle and humanlike skeletal frame, he

could make direct use of his fighting skills while possessing ten times the strength of any man. If a large man who trained at the gym got that one from his Monster Tonic pull, he was untouchable.

The gorilla grabbed the case while the bull and stallion took position in front of and behind him respectively. The escort group formed a column, but as they were about to leave the room, something unexpected happened.

…Clack!!

"Whoa! I-it's pitch black!" cried the boss.

"Looks like the breakers are out," said the tour guide. "It should switch to emergency power in a second, though."

"Agh, what a disaster. The customers are makin' a fuss. Get that shit fixed!!!"

The two of them were yelling, but then something quieted their clamoring.

Screeeeeeech…

A shrieking sound.

It was a shrill creaking that resembled the "house settling" phenomenon common in old homes, a strange noise produced from the contraction of the building materials. It couldn't have come at a worse time, considering the room was totally dark.

"Eeep…?!"

"Don't freak out! It's just a creepy noise!" The boss's vulgar dog face twisted up as he barked at his staff for being frightened. "There were tons of deaths in the buildin's 'round here. There was a cluster of infections durin' the pandemic, so many that they were pilin' mountains of body bags of the residents in the hallways."

"S-so then it could be…a ghost…?!"

"Like hell it is, ya moron! Someone is gettin' beat to death in this town every damn day! If we got ghosts every single time, we wouldn't have room left to open up shop! Get yer ass movin' and fix the power. That and the cash. Is the cash safe?!" the boss called into the darkness.

But the brawny bodyguards standing by the entrance—those mountains of muscle—had disappeared.

"They're not there, Boss."

"What? Don't be ridiculous…" The tour guide and his boss timidly investigated the space where the vanished men should have been. Their eyes hadn't yet acclimated to the darkness. That was when, canine nose twitching, the boss picked up on a certain stench. "… Huh? The hell is this?"

Drip, drip, drip…

Three drops fell from above.

He wiped the liquid that had fallen onto his cheek and stuck to his thin fur with a finger, then reflexively sniffed it.

It was like sniffing the public washroom at the station, like the wind that blew through a tunnel the moment the subway train passed.

It smelled like piss.

Crack, crack.

The breakers audibly restarted, and the moment the lights were on again, both of the Beastmen's screams rang out.

""Hyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek?!""

Right above the boss and the tour guide, the three Beastmen were hanging from the cheap plasterboard ceiling.

The hyoid bones in their skulls had been broken. Their tongues were hanging out of their mouths, down past their jaws, and urine was leaking out of them from stress incontinence, dripping down their pant legs to form a puddle on the floor.

These large, herbivorous Beastmen weighed over a ton altogether, and none of them had even been able to scream.

It had happened in less than a minute. They just died like flies caught by a spider while the power had been out.

The number of deaths in the Black Tower Casino that night: three.

Cause of death: strangulation or hanging. The boss covered up the situation and immediately disposed of the bodies, burning them in a metal drum in the back along with the strange thread left at the scene of the crime—a black fiber thought to be the murder weapon.

Later, some people complained to Fantastic Sweeper, which had a contract with Masquerade management, about the stench of burning bodies.

While the cleaners who were deployed discovered the illegally disposed of bodies…

"A hundred million vanished?"

The investigators' records said that approximately a hundred million yen had vanished along with the attaché case, the briefcase they were holding.

The boss and the tour guide were deemed responsible, and the upper ranks of the illegal casino abducted them to be used as pawns in a death game, making the two difficult to pursue.

The lawless town where anything went, the Masquerade—Natsukibara.

A week had passed since the uproar in the bar district caused by the rag-wringing Phantasm and the arson at the girls bar.

Yet no one knew what had really happened during that incident.

MONSTER HOLIC

MONSTERHOLIC 2

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 Dealing with the Aftermath and What Happens Next —

The smell of humans burning was a lot like that of burning wax.

The flesh, fat, and bone went up in flames, mingling and melding into the smoke that trailed out of nearby smokestacks. Watching as that smoke dissipated into the early summer sky…

"You know what?"

…a boy wearing a school uniform instead of mourning attire addressed a girl in a uniform from the same school.

"What?" she asked.

"Apparently, most people used to gather for funerals before the pandemic. Dozens of people, sometimes hundreds."

"What would they do, getting that many people together?"

"They would listen to a monk, a pastor, a Shinto priest, or whoever talk…and hold a ceremony to mourn the dead," the boy explained, his tone somewhat cynical.

His hair was about seventy percent black and thirty percent white, and his features, covered by his face mask, were well-proportioned and beautiful.

He had a slender stature and balanced physique, youthful and slim like the modern ideal. It was fair to call him handsome, but actually, he just didn't eat enough to be fat because he was poor.

With a sigh, he blew white mist out the sides of his mask. It looked like cigarette smoke from a bygone era.

The girl replied to him, "I see. That's really nice."

"…You think?"

"It must be comforting to be able to share the pain of having lost someone close to you with a lot of people. It would benefit the living more than the one who had passed."

Her long black hair flowed and fluttered in the wind.

The uniformed girl had a modest beauty. Her pale fingers looked almost illusory as she pressed down on her hair with them, as did her delicate profile as she mourned the dead.

She wore minimal makeup. They were outdoors, so she'd removed and carefully folded her old-fashioned nonwoven mask to reveal her arresting features shadowed in heavy sadness.

The beautiful girl had taken the equally beautiful boy to the outside of a funeral hall where someone was being cremated at that very moment. Waiting for the process to finish, the two of them stood in the courtyard between the lounge, where the family of the deceased was, and the terrace. They gazed listlessly at the sky.

"I'm not familiar with places like this," said the girl. "Never would have thought that funeral homes would have lounges."

"They're for the living relatives of the deceased," the boy replied. "They get hungry and tired."

The grounds had both a funeral hall for holding family burials and a crematory for burning bodies.

"The attendees need a place where they can *take* lunch and reminisce," the boy added. "That's what my boss says, at least."

"That's surprising. So he *does* talk about normal adult things, too."

"He says something useful every once in a while if you can put up with about twice as many worthless factoids."

"I think you're pretty bad, too. Only old people talk about 'taking lunch' these days."

"Blame that on me having to drop out of school. I had no choice but to learn language through movies and comic books."

When someone lived on the margins of society, their sense of what counted as "normal" was off.

Still, one thing felt strange to him. "I don't get it. Why did you come to a funeral you can't even properly attend?"

"You weren't invited, either," she replied. "So why are you here?"

"For work. Our boss is interested in you. He told me to keep an eye on you."

"I see. Maybe I should do something special to make it at least somewhat worthwhile for you."

"What exactly?"

"It would be uncomfortable if I sang or danced. I'm no good at either." Looking a bit serious, the girl made an eccentric suggestion.

"…Let's go have some ramen. Your treat."

"…I'd rather split the bill."

The boy's name was Reiji Kasumi. He was an employee of Fantastic Sweeper, which was subcontracted to keep the peace in the Masquerade and clean the streets.

He was also the descendant of inhuman creatures, a Mythic Beast living in the modern era—a Special Permanent Beast.

The girl's name was Kei Kakiba. She was an honor student. To help the orphanage where she grew up, she had been working part-time at a high school bunny-girl themed bar in the Masquerade. But while she was on the clock, a Phantasm known as the rag wringer had attacked the bar, resulting in the owner's death.

A few days had passed since the rag wringer's attack on the bar.

Despite not being invited to the funeral, Kei had come a long way to pay her respects to her boss, and Reiji had quietly accompanied her. Standing side by side in the courtyard of the funeral hall, the two continued idly chatting.

"Were you close with the owner?" asked Reiji.

"We were purely boss and employee. He tried to keep things professional, but since he was a kind person…he gave me a lot of advice, and the staff thought of him as family."

"That's a great boss. I'd like to tell mine about him… He never pays us for overtime."

"So he's one of those. What was his name again? Narasaki?"

"Guess he didn't make that much of an impression on you. That's good. He's not the kind of guy you want to be close with."

"Yes, I'd like to stay clear of him. But since he's sent you out here, maybe I should say something to him. Tell him that I'm just a normal high school student who isn't worth investigating."

"…Can't say there are many 'normal high school students' who work night shifts in a lawless area and can make liquids with mysterious effects just by mixing normal store-bought drinks."

"Aren't I more normal than you? You go to school even though your family register has you listed as some 'mystery mist.'"

"Can you ease up a little? You're killing me."

A chuckle finally spilled from Kei's lips.

Standing beside her, Reiji gave a slight smile of his own. “Getting back to the topic at hand, bodies that turn up in the Masquerade are generally just thrown away. I do it a lot myself.”

“So you don’t have funerals, even though you’re a cleaner?”

“I couldn’t hold one if I wanted to. We don’t know their identities, so their family and friends on the outside never hear about their deaths.”

But the owner of the bar where Kei had worked was different.

He’d always made sure to keep his ID on him to make sure that his death would be recognized if the worst happened.

“He and his ex-wife had a son,” said Kei. “The kid’s in university.”

“If he’s over twenty, then he’s an adult. That’s pretty conscientious of the owner.”

“Since his identity was proven, there shouldn’t be any issues with sorting out life insurance and inheritance. There’s a lot of violence in this town, so my boss must have figured this would happen and prepared accordingly. He even had a will.”

“That’s thorough.”

“Right? But there are some possessions that just have nowhere to go. I came to pick them up today. I’ve contacted the family, and we arranged to meet after the funeral.”

“You contacted them on social media? That will expose your identity.”

“Yeah, I know. I gave the family the gist of what happened and explained that I was one of the employees.”

In an ultra-controlled society, social media had lost just about all anonymity.

By contacting her boss’s family, even via social media, Kei was essentially confessing to working nights in an area high schoolers were barred from. If anything about this got out, her position as an honor student would go *poof*.

But as far as she was concerned, some things just had to be done, even if it meant putting herself at risk.

“I even told them that I was basically responsible for his death… though I don’t think they believed me.”

“Did you say that because the culprit—the rag wringer—was

fixated on you?”

A man had taken a special leaked version of Monster Tonic, and subsequently became a “Phantasm,” a monster out of urban legend.

Hoping to find a way to become human again, that creature had laid in wait at the bar where the deal for the drug had been made, quietly waiting for his chance. When Kei revealed her talent for tonic mixing, he’d gone after her, and in the process, killed the bar owner, who had also been present.

“I omitted the part about Phantasms and such, so they assumed it was a stalker who was obsessed with me. They just said, ‘Oh, so that’s what happened.’ Didn’t blame me at all.”

“Maybe we can assume they’re good people.”

“I don’t know. I felt like they just weren’t interested. Like, they just didn’t care.”

“Really? Even if they were estranged from the guy, they were still family.”

“It seemed like they cared more about the money. And when I said I would pay for the little guys I’m taking, they decided just to hand them over, which does help me, but still.” Kei pulled up the conversation on her phone and showed it to Reiji.

The exchange had happened over DMs. It was completely businesslike—basically no different from a price negotiation on an online auction app.

“…‘Twenty thousand yen per rabbit. Five in total.’ ‘Okay, understood’…?” As Reiji casually read a snippet of the conversation aloud, his brow furrowed. “He kept rabbits?”

“He needed them for the job. I used the fur for the ‘stuff’ I mixed.”

“I see.”

That was Kei Kakiba’s unusual power: the ability to make special varieties of Monster Tonic by mixing random drinks and ingredients with Monster Tonics sold in stores. Kei didn’t think much of this, but her concoctions could transform people into the same animal as whatever creature’s fur she mixed into them.

“There were five rabbits used for material for the Tonic we took,” said Kei. “It seemed like the family would get rid of the rabbits

without the owner to take care of them, so I offered to buy them."

"Do you have someplace for them to go? You can't take care of that many alone."

"My coworkers have already taken most of them. I came to pick up the last one for myself today."

"Why?"

"Shipping live animals is expensive! It was cheaper just to pay for the train to get here."

"…That's so…logical."

"I told the family I didn't want to bother them on the day of the funeral, but they insisted I come by so that they didn't spend any money taking care of the rabbits. Thus I was able to say goodbye."

Kei pulled out her wallet and opened it, revealing two high-value paper bills—an unusual sight these days.

In this era of electronic money, cash was hardly ever used.

But the advantage was that it was difficult to track once it was withdrawn, so it was still sometimes used for direct exchange between individuals, and picking the rabbit up from the owner's family was one of those transactions.

"There was a risk my identity would be exposed, but I didn't want the bunnies to get hurt. That's all."

"I get that."

They watched as the crematory smoke thinned and faded.

There were just two people attending the funeral. One was a middle-aged woman wearing a black dress that was more or less adequately mournful but with fancy, eye-catching jewelry, and the other was a slim young man who appeared to be a university student. His outfit was rather loud and inappropriate for a funeral, making him look as if he'd come straight over from his university campus.

One of the walls of the lounge was made entirely of glass, contributing to the atmosphere of funeral services, which tended to feel suffocating. This gave the occupants a clear view of the empty terrace seats and courtyard where Reiji and Kei stood and vice versa.

In the distance, the pair observed the mother and son through the glass.

The two of them were standing fairly far apart—it seemed more like an expression of their distaste for being in each other's proximity than social distancing.

"Family is important," said Reiji. "If someone I care about left something behind for me, then I'd gladly take care of it."

"Yeah," Kei replied.

"That's why I think you're doing the right thing with the rabbits. It's good you're giving them homes," Reiji added, only able to express himself in an awkward way.

Seeing right through him, Kei gave him a peaceful smile. "Thanks. That makes me feel a bit better."

"Good… Well, that part is good, but…"

On the other side of the glass, the two family members started to argue.

Reiji and Kei were too far away to hear what they were saying. But it seemed to be some kind of disagreement, mother and son glaring at each other.

"They sure don't seem solemn," said Reiji.

"I don't think it's very nice to pry into other peoples' business."

"I agree. But it's uncomfortable that they're going at it where we can see. I can tell what's happening, whether I like it or not."

"We're pretty far away, to be fair… Can you hear them?"

"My body composition being what it is, I'm sensitive to vibrations. It works like a tin can telephone… I guess it'd be easier if you could hear it, too."

Fsssssssss…

There came the sound of gentle spray as mist leaked from his mask.

A fog-like trail fell from Reiji's mouth, reaching the funeral hall, which happened to be downwind.

"With my mist touching the glass of the funeral hall window, the vibrations reach me as sound."

The thread of vapor that thinly connected them worked as the string, bringing the family's conversation to them as if by a tin can phone.

While he had been designated "vampire" as a Special Permanent

Beast, no one knew what he really was. Reiji Kasumi was a vapor life form, a monster of mist, the Brocken—the descendant of an ancient species, maintaining his human form via a drug.

"I know all about it. It was you, wasn't it? Oh dear. Return the title deed this instant."

The voice of the woman was transmitted straight to them, and Kei said curiously, "Title deed?"

But of course the woman couldn't hear her, and the argument between the pair continued.

"I don't know anything about it," said the son. *"What are you talking about?"*

"Don't play stupid. You're the one who opened the safe. You and your sticky fingers…!"

"How the hell would I know about that? Dad got rid of it."

"Don't be ridiculous. He must have had real estate aside from the building that burned down!"

"So what if you did find it? You're just gonna sell it off to support some man."

"How dare you speak like that to your mother!"

"Stop trying to act like a parent only when it suits you, Mom. You and Dad are both idiots."

"What did you say?!"

"If he'd done a decent job out in town, he could have made plenty of money. But instead, he played philanthropist. He took in people with nowhere else to go and paid them fair wages, so he just barely got by. Isn't that stupid?"

Both Reiji and Kei knew what the phrase "out in town" implicitly referred to.

The Masquerade—Natsukibara.

The late owner had been an old-timer, an influential man from before it had become a lawless district.

"That's right. I told him many times myself, but he never listened…!"

"And you're just as massive an idiot as he was, getting divorced after you slept around because you wanted more attention. Just thinking about us being related makes me sick."

"…Wh-wh-what…?!"

At this point, Reiji's expression turned quite bitter. "I know I'm the one who started eavesdropping, but maybe we shouldn't be listening to this. What kind of TV drama is this?"

"…The boss sure had a complicated family situation. Though I had heard his wife was the one who initiated the divorce."

"I won't say I'm not curious, but this is getting unbearable…"

Heedless of the pair who watched them nervously, the argument intensified.

"I'm not like Dad. I'll do it right. I can be successful in business. I'll make a whole lot of money and enjoy the luxuries he never gave us. Cool cars, a big house, hot girls… Like hell am I going back to that shitty, bottom-tier university!"

"Don't be ridiculous! That inheritance is also mine, for starters! You don't get to choose!"

"There you go. It's about the money, after all. You never loved Dad. You just love money. That's why you didn't cry a single tear at the funeral. All you care about is your share."

"…You're no different!"

"Well, duh. He chose some dirty whores over his own son. Asshole told me to get a job if I wanted an allowance."

"Oh…what a miserable man he was! So stingy."

Kei and Reiji exchanged glances.

"…Is that really so bad?" asked Reiji. "I think it's pretty normal to have to work if you want money."

"Same here," Kei agreed. "Are we the weird ones?"

"I don't know. At the very least, that woman and her son seem to be convinced they're in the right."

As Kei and Reiji talked, the mother and son continued berating each other.

"Anyway, keep your fingers off the rest of the inheritance," said the mother. *"It's for me!"*

"Shouldn't I have a right to it, too?! Give me a break, you greedy old hag!"

"Be quiet, thief! Give it—give it back!!!"

"Shut up! Drop dead, you old hag…!"

Finally it got physical. The woman hit her son, and the son immediately struck back.

"Yeeeeeeeek!"

The scream could be heard even without Reiji's powers broadcasting it.

The son hit his mother with a closefisted strike that made an audible *thwack*.

The mother crumpled to the floor, and the enraged son picked up a nearby chair and lifted it over her.

"Stop him, Kasumi," said Kei. "Now he's using a weapon."

"…All right. It's within range."

Fsssssssssssss…

There was a soft spraying sound. The hiss of misting gas coming from Reiji's mouth slowly intensified.

A strange substance like white mist, fog, or smoke overflowed from the cracks of his mask, crawling along the ground like the sublimation of dry ice, fading just enough for it to be almost invisible as it filled the area.

There was about thirty feet between where Kei and Reiji stood and the funeral hall.

And the mother and son were in the lounge, separated from them by thick glass. They couldn't enter directly. But the mist that Reiji created quietly sneaked up on them.

"Monochrome Mist Style: White Tripper."

As the son lifted the chair, a very small amount of mist reached his feet.

The fog slid into the gap between the floor and the soles of his shoes, then changed, becoming slick with incredibly low friction.

"He fell. What did you do?"

"I changed my mist into mucus and tripped him. Ever heard of this thing called a hagfish?"

"It's that slimy fish, right? I've heard they taste surprisingly good."

"Well, I made my mist do the same thing as a hagfish. It reacts with the moisture in the air and expands abruptly to reduce friction. Basically, I just made the floor really slippery. That should be enough

to intercede in the fight."

"Ow…!" the son groaned, rubbing his head where it ached from the fall.

The next thing they heard was the mother's voice. It was a nasty yell with not a shred of love in it.

"Who cares about you?! Money, the money is what I need! It's not yours. It's mine!!!"

"Shut up, you trashy old bitch! Fuck off! Drop dead!"

They were both giving as good as they got.

The mother grabbed at the son, and the son shook her off, shoving her away and then racing out of the lounge.

He continued through the entrance of the funeral hall to burst out into the courtyard.

"…Um!" Kei quickly called out, reaching toward the son.

"Shut up. Don't touch me!" He slapped her hand away. "It's not my fault! It's that wrinkly bitch who's in the wrong!!!" His insults weren't even inventive.

Dashing outside, he stopped the self-driving taxi that just happened to be passing by and vanished.

"Even if you did get him to stop, I doubt you would have been able to have a proper conversation," said Reiji.

"I agree, but I figured it would be a bad idea just to let him go… What should we do?"

"There's nothing to be done. Let's hope he cools his head in that taxi." Reiji figured he wasn't obligated to do any more than that. His conclusion was a cold one, though obvious enough, and after voicing it, he turned his attention to the funeral hall.

The mother was flying out of the building after her son, yelling loudly and furiously.

"ARRRGH! Where did he go?! Give it back, you thief! Thiiiiief!!!"

"…That's the lady you were going to buy the rabbit off of. Shouldn't you be worried about her?" Reiji pointed out.

"True… I'm sorry. This is pretty nasty."

While listening to the woman's demonic screams, Kei Kakiba looked up at the sky.

Up above, the crematory smoke that stretched from the funeral hall chimney into the clouds was thin and faint.

And then, as if to inform them that the corpse had burned out, it vanished.

*

"So you managed to save the bunny?"

"The lady jacked up the price at the last minute… I paid for it, but I'm not really happy about it."

Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.

The surprisingly pleasant sound of a rabbit nibbling on cabbage filled the messy office.

The white rabbit must not have been comfortable yet, as it was sticking to the back of its cage. A girl in a wheelchair watched it with deep interest, then turned to Kei, who looked exhausted. "Forty thousand yen for one rabbit. That's cheap in exchange for a life."

The person in the wheelchair was a fierce-looking girl. She wore the girls' uniform of Akanebara Municipal High School, just like Kei.

Her remark was intense, and her expression was determined. Her moderately tanned skin gave her an athletic impression, and she exuded an indomitable toughness. This girl, with her unruly head of hair, was Mei Mezuki.

She had been involved in the hit-and-run centaur incident a few days prior and now occupied a special position.

A second-year student in high school, she was also a regular visitor at Fantastic Sweeper, which had an office in a certain location in the Masquerade.

The pair of high school girls weren't taking Monster Tonic, so their current appearance was unaltered. They hadn't needed to walk through town since an accessible self-driving vehicle had picked them up from Natsukibara Station.

"That's more than what we live on, at least."

“That could last us two months.”

Then there was the duo making some dubiously tightfisted comments.

One of them was Reiji Kasumi. The other was a boy whose hair was more yellow than blond, carrying a convenience store bag filled with ready-made food and drinks that he’d bought for the occasion.

His mild-looking face made him seem too nice to be a delinquent. But the thickness of his neck and his muscular arms showing under his short sleeves gave him the appearance of an ancient warrior. He was burly enough that it was apt to call him strapping.

Getsu Raisan was Reiji’s coworker at Fantastic Sweeper and a Special Permanent Beast, a werewolf. He was Reiji’s partner for investigating incidents and one of the people who had been summoned to the office.

“Tough times as always, hmm? Why not raise their pay?” Mei suggested to the other person there.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, that hits too close to home. But since they don’t have human rights, they don’t have the freedom to choose their jobs.” It was quite an awful thing to say, but the man said it with a bright and chipper tone.

The office was cluttered, with mystery junk lying everywhere. It was packed with strange curios that seemed more like souvenirs from foreign lands than anything used for office work—wooden carved figures that appeared to be African in origin, enigmatic specimens, and strange herbs.

In the middle of this scattered mess was a desk with such presence, it seemed almost arrogant.

The tabletop was heavy, as was often the case with antiques, occupied by scattered stacks of paper and a half-finished cup of coffee.

Behind it was a man who had the air of an eccentric university professor—the president of Fantastic Sweeper, Narasaki.

This was Reiji and Getsu’s boss. He was also the one who had summoned this group of young men and women to the office. “I plan to do everything I can to take advantage of your weaknesses! If you don’t like it, then do your best to get away from me, though

it's practically impossible."

"Prove your usefulness. Establish a track record by solving cases, update your credit score, and you'll have a shot." Beside Narasaki was a compact desk, this one quite barren and ordinary-looking. Behind it sat a woman of unknown age with the appearance of a twelve-or thirteen-year-old girl. This was the president's secretary, Neru Hoozuki, a whiz who handled all their technical support. Despite her cherubic features, her expression had a cynical, sarcastic edge. "What's your plan for the rabbit? Going to take care of it?" she asked.

"That's the idea," said Kei.

"But your apartment doesn't allow pets. Get found out, and there goes your credit score."

"…I was thinking I could sneak it into my place, but maybe that's pushing it."

"Impossible. They'd know. You're naive," she said curtly, a sharp retort served in a childlike voice.

"I see… Then I should look into moving. Though I don't have much money." Kei looked troubled.

"Wait, so you speak politely to Neru, huh?" Getsu cut in.

Looking at him calmly, Kei answered, "She warned me that I was being careless in that area, so I think I should be respectful since she's an adult. It's not good to judge people based on their age or appearance, and I think you should be polite."

"Huh. That sounds pretty smart…"

"In fact, I think the fact that Mezuki generally speaks the same way to everyone is too much. She put all her stat points into fighting instinct."

"I judge people based on their power," said Mei. "I like strong people."

"Are you the reincarnation of a Spartan or something? I feel like you're about to get dumped naked into a field."

"Huh? What's a Spartan? Where are they from?"

"The Spartans were from a country where physical strength was everything. I watched this movie about them where three hundred Spartans held back a million men."

"Wow, that's crazy… I'm gonna watch that later."

It was unclear whether those two meshed well or not. Or perhaps they were just failing to get along so badly that they wound up being in sync somehow.

One would expect a wheelchair-using ex-athlete and an honor student who had worked in nightlife to be opposites, but they were hitting it off.

"You're talking about the battle of Thermopylae. Amazing to think that a legend from 480 BCE has persisted until the modern day and is still influencing people via modern adaptations. That's why folklore is so interesting," Narasaki said. He then changed topics. "Now then, about the issue of Kei Kakiba moving… That would be difficult financially and socially, wouldn't it? You're a minor, and getting a lease for a studio that allows pets seems rather difficult."

"But this little bunny's gonna be family," said Kei. "I'll come up with something."

"Hmm? How odd. You're going to speak casually to me? Even though I'm a company president?"

"You're sketchy. You were just waiting this whole time for an opportunity to cut into our conversation, weren't you?"

"Guilty as charged. Well, I don't mean to hide it, but our company has some amazing employee benefits."

Narasaki was in a fine mood. The pipe in his hand was unlit, but he was fiddling with it, spinning it around as he spoke.

Then he snapped his fingers. Taking that as her cue, Neru carried over something to him with a *hmph*.

It was a square object, but its contents were hidden under a cloth.

It was light enough for someone as small as Neru to carry, so it couldn't be that heavy for its size.

A series of rustling sounds came from the box, as though something was moving inside. The moment Reiji noticed this, he gasped. "…!"

"What's the matter, Kasumi?" asked Kei.

"Sorry, Kakiba… It's just been a while since I've seen him. Hey… Butt! Butt!!!"

"Huh?!"

Rushing up to Neru, Reiji immediately yanked off the cloth that covered the object.

"…A pet cage?"

"Butt, the hamster. He's the only living family I have now." Inside the cage, the hamster's bottom was sticking out from the soft bed of wood chips. It was round and cute, the color of toast, and it captivated Reiji. "You doing okay, Butt? You're not hungry? Has Neru been giving you affection?"

"I don't think it can answer," said Kei.

"I know. Of course he won't understand human language. But I believe it's possible for my love to get across."

"That would take a miracle."

"I know it won't happen, but I want to believe it. That's just how it is."

Though he got as close to the cage as he could, he refrained from touching the see-through walls.

The hamster inside must have been asleep, twitching his fluffy bottom without showing his face.

But Reiji gazed at the creature gently, as if to say that he didn't care about that.

"Let me introduce you. This is Butt the hamster. We live separately now…but he's family."

As Reiji proudly introduced the rodent, Kei and Mei peered in beside him, oohing and ahhing.

Butt must have been tuckered out, snoozing while buried under the woodchips as he was.

"…He's seriously cute," said Mei.

"Yes, quite adorable… Why don't you live together?" Kei asked.

"I have my reasons. I hope we can be together at some point, though," Reiji said, his shoulders drooping.

Getsu filled in, scratching his cheek. "Truth is, Butt isn't too fond of Reiji. If Reiji tries to touch him, Butt will bite or run away."

"Hmph…!" Reiji seemed deeply frustrated.

As Neru held out the cage, Narasaki came up beside her and smirked. "It's a memento of Reiji's family. For that reason, our

company takes care of it."

"It's just food and expenses," said Neru. "Not anything to brag about, scumbag."

"You wound me, Neru! This is how I show my love to my employees, you know! I think it's deserving of admiration."

"If you want to be admired, then you take care of the thing. I do all the feeding, change the water, and clean."

"But rodents are so scary. I can't bear them, so you can keep handling that."

"You're such scum…!"

Even faced with his diminutive secretary's legitimately rebellious glare, Narasaki was grinning like it was nothing. "Well, a capable secretary like Neru should be able to handle caring for a rabbit on top of a hamster without issue. I'll offer a free room at our company, so we'll handle it until you can move."

"That…would be a big help. But is that okay?"





"Of course. However, you should care for it as much as possible. I won't say to come every day, but I'd like you to make it every other day at least since Neru has her hands full with so many things!"

The strangely long-winded and emphatic way he spoke turned Kei's gladness into suspicion. "…This feels dangerous. Am I being coerced into coming here regularly?"

"I mean, you won't work for me. We'd pay you double what I pay those two animals, though."

"Don't call us animals," Getsu cut in. "And even double our pay would be too low."

"Yeah. You're paying us so little to begin with," Reiji added.

"No more barking and meowing, gentlemen. It'll lower your wages, and you can call it a tax for not loving your boss."

"What a tyrant…," Getsu grumbled, fed up.

Mei, listening from the side, tugged at Kei's sleeve. "I think it'd be better for me to keep it at my place rather than relying on Narasaki. What do you think?"

"…While I will consider it, Neru seems trustworthy, her boss aside."

"That's true. Way more than that guy."

"But," Kei said with a sigh. "I can't keep relying on you, Mezuki. And as creepy as he is, I think I'll suck it up."

"I hate my surname, so you can use my given name. Call me Mei."

"…You hate your surname?"

"The stroke count is too high, making it hard to write, and the characters are hard to read, so whenever I first meet someone, people always ask me how to pronounce it. Not like it matters that much, but… Anyway, just don't worry about it, Kei." To communicate her desire to be called by her given name, Mei called Kei by hers. "With my legs like this, it's not like I can do much of anything. I can at least manage taking care of a rabbit."

"…Thanks. If things here reach a point of being too sketchy, then I'll ask you to take care of him, Mei."

The two of them exchanged smiles, innocent and kind of awkward.

"What a mean thing to say. I think you could show some gratitude," Narasaki remarked.

"That's what you get for being annoying," said Neru.

"It's totally obvious you're up to something, Boss," Getsu added. "Why not at least pretend to have good intentions?"

"You're lucky she's not taking out a restraining order against you," Reiji quipped.

With secretary, werewolf, and mystery mist all attacking him, the boss's lack of popularity was clear.

Yet he was far from upset about it, grinning happily. "Ha-ha-ha, well, I don't mind. It's not like I want to be buddy-buddy with you all.

"No matter how much hostility I inspire in you, you can't afford to cut ties with me. And it's clear that Kei and the rest of you have at least the bare minimum of social skills. If you chose to ignore your interests, lash out at me, and run away or something, that would just be a hassle for me, too."

"…Could it be you deliberately riled us up just to test if we would?" said Kei.

"Who knows? Maybe I'm just doing this for fun. Well, you can refuse to work for me, but that won't change the fact that there's still dangerous Tonic going around. And you can't ignore that, can you?"

"""……"""

Reiji, Getsu, Kei, and Mei all silently exchanged glances, then nodded at each other.

"It is part of our job. Of course we have to continue the investigation…," said Reiji.

"Since you worked at that bar, Kei, it'd help to have you with us investigating where the leak came from. How 'bout it?" Getsu followed up.

"…I don't mind helping you two out," Kei answered. "I do owe you. But…" She eyed Narasaki.

Unable to shake her suspicion and lack of trust, it was difficult for her to readily agree.

Normally, I could immediately say yes, Kei thought.

She had a personal revulsion for him that she didn't even understand herself. It was like when two dogs bump into each other on a walk and start barking for no reason. Her hesitancy to join was not so much emotional as it was instinctual.

"If you don't like that old man, I'll hire you. I'll reward you with an appropriate cut from what I'm paying those two," Mei said resolutely to do away with Kei's hesitation.

"Huh?"

"Hey, that means our cut goes down…," complained Getsu.

"That's fine. Even divided between three, it's a lot of money," said Mei. "Besides, we need Kei for our investigation moving forward."

"…If she hadn't been around during that fight, I would have dispersed," Reiji added. "No objections here."

"Well, that's true. It's so much money, and it doesn't feel real anyway, so sure," said Getsu.

"Hey, can you not come to an agreement before I even say anything?" Kei asked, resisting being pushed into a decision. "I don't like the idea of taking money from a friend to do a job. I don't know how much the reward is, but I would be reducing their income by whatever I'm getting paid, so it wouldn't kill me to pitch in for free…"

"No. I'm going to pay you," said Mei. "And in exchange, you'll do things right. This is a serious contract with no exceptions. Besides, like I just said, the reward is a lot of money, even divided between three parties." She smacked her knee.

"We're talking about the estimated value of a future star of women's track. The insurance policy on these legs is worth two hundred million yen."

"What…? Two hundred million?!"

The hit-and-run centaur, aka Mai Ikeda, had taken the Mythic Tonic that had been leaked at the beginning of all this and gone out of control, running down a number of people. For her sake, Mei Mezuki had offered them the sum of two hundred million yen for investigating her junior's death and making the culprit take responsibility.

"Half goes to the company, and half of what's left goes to these guys. Payment is contingent on your success, so you'll get it after

the fact. That's kind of crazy money, right?"

"Kind of crazy money…? That *is* crazy money… It doesn't feel real at all," Kei murmured.

"Right, I get that. I can't even imagine a hundred million," said Getsu. "You think that could buy me some fancy tuna sashimi?"

"You could get some basic tuna and onion sushi. Don't get your hopes up," Reiji shot back.

"Maybe it's the poverty ingrained in you, but you guys sure are stingy. You could eat a whole tuna fish with a hundred million," Mei told them.

"""Ohhhh…!"""

The Beastmen with no human rights and the working student who just barely maintained hers—

Their eyes all lit up.

Kei firmly grabbed the hands of her sponsor Mei and said, "I'll do anything except sex work. Can you give me the work regulations?"

Seeing the sparkling eyes of these paupers, Mei replied in exasperation, "There aren't any."

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"You're not going to eat?" asked Kei.

"I still think like an athlete," Mei replied. "Sugar and fat are very tasty enemies."

"Adding 'tasty' makes that sound real sincere…"

A modest meal had been laid out to welcome Mei, their sponsor, and Kei, whom the president was fixated on.

The refreshments provided were all ready-made takeout from nearby establishments—dubious bars, fishy street stalls with zero hygiene standards, and brothels where the food was basically a bonus.

"It's quite a hassle to get an ordinary meal around here," said Narasaki. "You don't need a business permit to set up, the health department never comes, and most Beastpeople will be fine no matter what they eat, so a lot of places have bad hygiene. Bringing

these to a natural human not on the Tonic means immediate food poisoning."

"Hearing that sure kills my appetite. Should I drink a Tonic right now?" Kei eyed the meal that had been prepared for them with disappointment.

But Narasaki smiled and dispelled her concerns. "Don't worry. Everything I've arranged for today is from legitimate businesses. To be specific, we have Chinese food from a restaurant run by a lady who ruined her life dating a sugar daddy in high school, curry from a place run by a foreigner working illegally, and cake from a pastry chef who was blacklisted for being too interested in minors."

"Can you stop adding those nasty details?! It's killing my appetite!" Mei cried.

"Are all the cooks in this town perverts…?" Kei wondered aloud.

"This is the only place that will take people who have been kicked out of society on the outside. Don't worry. Their sexual proclivities and their cooking skills are two different things. I personally vouch for the flavor."

The table was lined with food, paid for by Narasaki and picked up by Getsu.

It did look good. It wasn't the sort of situation where food tasted better than it looked—fried cloud ear mushrooms with egg, shiitake and greens stir-fried and boiled, and seafood fried rice were all carefully arranged into takeout containers from the Chinese restaurant.

There was also fried chicken with cashews and sesame balls. And in addition to that was keema and spinach curry, butter chicken curry, and lots of steaming cheese naan. For dessert, there were many gorgeous cakes.

Everything was a step above the average meal they could get on the outside, and it was quite enough to stimulate the appetite.

"Man, these are so much better than the expired ramen, bread with no jam, and wilted cabbage boiled to hell that I usually eat…," Getsu said.

"Don't be tempted, Getsu," Reiji admonished him. "If you scarf it down just because the boss is paying and make a bad impression on

our client—”

“So it’s a trap! I bet he’d be really obnoxious about it and say something like, ‘You’re paying for all you ate out of pocket! ☆’”

In front of the big table in the reception room was a decent sofa that was at least free of holes.

The bottom-rung employees gave the good seats to Mei and Kei while they themselves settled down into folding chairs in the corner and trashed their boss in whispers.

Then Narasaki said, as if to express his offense, “Of course I’m not that stingy. Relax. However, since you cooked some rice, make sure to stuff yourselves on it first. No bingeing on the main dishes.”

“You run this ship like a capitalist devil,” said Mei.

“The poor get fat on carbohydrates, and the wealthy stay slim on healthy meats and vegetables,” Narasaki replied. “Even this lawless district is a microcosm of modern society. Anyway, go ahead and dig in.”

“”Let’s eat!””

The pair voiced their assent without much in the way of complaints and scarfed down rice from the rice cooker that clashed with the aesthetic of the office. Then they hesitantly put a little bit of the ordered dishes on their plates, and their impression was—

“Damn, this is so good…!!!” exclaimed Getsu.

“I haven’t had a meal like this in a long time… I can feel my loyalty to the company increasing,” Reiji agreed.

“Just what kind of lifestyle do you two normally live?” asked Mei. “…Anyway, this is decent food.”

“Even if the people making it are perverts, good food is still good food, huh? Though this does feel a bit corrupt,” said Kei.

“If you’re not having any cake, I will. Heh-heh-heh, more for me,” Neru replied.

“Ah, Neru, don’t monopolize the sweets!” Narasaki cried. “I had my eyes on that chocolate one!”

They spent some time around the table, chopsticks and spoons plunging into the takeout containers.

They’d set out enough food for seven or eight people, but these

were four growing teenagers. The adult pair, Neru and Narasaki, was also laying waste to the desserts with surprising gluttony, and so the plates and glasses quickly emptied.

"…I won," said Mei.

"No, you lost to some really tasty enemies. You ate tons," Kei shot at her.

"It was good, so I won. Calories really are violence, the natural enemy of an athlete."

Mei had been reluctant at first, but in the end, she'd had a full meal. While she'd eaten in small amounts, she took her time savoring the flavor, sampling all the dishes, and having a small amount of naan with her post-meal tea.

"You're retired from the club anyway. You don't gotta restrict your eating, do you?" asked Getsu.

"No, I do. I said to that idiot—the stupid hit-and-run centaur Mai—that I'd go to the Paralympics. I haven't decided on the sport, though."

She'd devoted her life to training the legs she was so proud of. It was her identity, her strongest asset—you could call it proof of her pride.

But even after having all of it ripped away from her, Mei had not broken.

"I'm keeping my body fat at fifteen percent. I've got six-pack abs. If my legs won't move, then I'll move with my arms or, worst case, with my jaw or eyelids. I'll move what I can move and do what I can do. No more, no less."

"…You're tough. That's like a steel—no, an iron will."

"Life is about motivation, guts, and determination. If you have the time to make excuses for why you're not doing something, it's faster just to take action." She wasn't just putting on a tough front. She genuinely believed that.

Kei giggled at her. "You really are a Spartan."

"I told you I have no idea who they are. I'm kind of dumb, you know—not that I'm proud of it."

"That really isn't something to be proud of. Were your grades bad?" Reiji was a little surprised.

Mei hummed in response. "In everything, aside from remembering competition rules and their loopholes. I hate studying."

"…I don't think that's the type of person who should be left to her own devices. Please continue being an athlete. I'll cheer you on," said Reiji.

"Yeah. If you were working in an office, I think people would die," added Getsu.

"That's some way to talk to your sponsor. And like…"

With a small amount of the main dishes and a large amount of rice, Getsu and Reiji's servings were proportioned all wrong, but the two still seemed satisfied at getting to have a bigger meal than usual.

Surprisingly, however, they weren't the biggest eaters of the night. "If nobody else is going to have it, then may I have the rest?" asked Kei.

"…Don't pour sauce on top of your rice in such a ridiculously classy way, Kakiba," said Reiji.

Her chopstick usage was mannerly, and her bowl was full of rice. Taste aside, there were ample amounts of the cheap old rice cooked by the staff. Kei served herself some and then took a portion of the remaining fried mushroom and egg, placing it on her rice and swiftly mixing it in.

Kei Kakiba was surprisingly gluttonous. She started off with the high-calorie cheese naan and seafood fried rice, devouring any food that seemed like it would be left over one after another in even proportions, fully enjoying the flavor down to the last crumb.

"This is delicious. I don't eat good food most of the time, either," she said.

"You're so skinny, but you can pack in more than any of us. Keep that up and you'll get fat," Mei warned.

"It's been proven that the sexual habits of the cook have nothing to do with the flavor. The cake from the man who likes little girls was particularly good. The slices were very moist and light."

"…A pedo making *moist* and *light* cakes makes me feel uncomfortable…"

"*Having* the desire isn't a sin. It is what it is. Acting on the urge is

a crime, but if he hasn't actually done anything, then I think you can call that just barely okay."

"If he's come to this place, the odds that he's actually done it aren't zero, though…," Getsu pointed out.

Kei's hand froze just as she brought it to the fruit cake. "…After hearing that, this cake smells kind of off to me."

"I can't say for sure, though! Like, seriously."

"Now what am I going to do? The fruit cake I just ate is rebelling," Kei said, a little teary.

"Suck it up. Those are hard-earned calories," Reiji said to support her.

"…Indeed. I don't really like the baker, but the calories aren't at fault." So she ate all the remaining cake, silently dividing the last bit in two before gulping each bite down. The meal was now completely cleaned up.

"You kids are perfectly on the same page," said Narasaki. "Well, that's a very good thing. How beautiful it is to have good friends."

"I don't particularly mean to be friendly. This is just normal," said Kei.

"Yeah," Reiji agreed. "It's nice that we can settle things quickly, though. We can get things across to each other without much talk."

"Just a look is enough, so it's convenient. We don't need to talk."

Reiji Kasumi and Kei Kakiba could communicate effectively with each other through eye contact. Since they were on the same wavelength, a simple form of mutual understanding had developed between them.

At a glance, the coolheaded pair seemed like they could make a good couple, but—

"You guys just see talking as a pain in the butt, don't you?" said Getsu.

"That too," Kei agreed.

"Yup," said Reiji.

"How unromantic… Well, this is more comfortable than things getting weird, though."

At the end of the day, they were just socially awkward people who thought conversing was more trouble than it was worth.

They were fine when it came to talking business, but small talk or personal conversations quickly exhausted them. Being on the same page about this made things a lot easier.

"Now then, since we're done with the meal, how about we have a bit of a meeting?" said Narasaki.

"But I'm sleepy, Boss," said Neru.

"Oh, you're tired? Go right ahead and have a nap once work is done. You all at least have one meal's worth of attention in you, right? That's why I fed you, after all," Narasaki said with a smirk, clapping a hand on his secretary Neru's shoulder as she rubbed her eyes sleepily.

Even now that they realized what this was about, the young people could not escape. They had already eaten the advance payment. Whatever sort of meeting they were to have, they would be going along with it accordingly.

"…Does this mean there's been some progress?" asked Mei.

"That's exactly it, Miss Sponsor. An unidentified video has been posted on the deep web about the leaked Mythic and Phantasm Tonics, featuring the previous hit-and-run centaur and rag-wringer incidents."

He turned on a large tablet on the desk that was attached to an Ethernet cable—a rare sight, these days—then launched an app with surprising familiarity. To be specific, it was a web browser with an unfamiliar icon.

"What is this?" asked Mei. "A cable for the internet? We aren't in the stone age, you know. This is the first I've ever seen a device go online with a cord."

"The thing is, this connection isn't going to the outside. This cable is used by shady people and organizations to exchange information on the deep web, away from state control… It's for spies, so to speak, and information brokers."

There was no wireless for that sort of thing—only wired connections from special access points. And one could only access this particular network via a browser that cost a pretty penny… Security was rock-solid.

"Some organization," Mei murmured. "…And they operate like

they have a lot of technical expertise. The Mafia?”

“What’s up with this company having access to something like that?” asked Kei. “Is this organized crime?”

“My principle is to use whatever I can. The trends here wind up on the deep web, then those are leaked and reposted by information brokers and quick-witted villains until that information finally reaches the people.”

It was just like water flowing from the aboveground to belowground.

“For example,” he continued, “underground school message board websites. Many citizens privately use ‘secret apps’ to gain access to rare info. Those apps originate on the deep web. Information brokers and businesses buy the deep web access rights that information businesses manage, and in order to get their money’s worth, they lend them space in the form of things like illegal message boards and underground school websites… It brings in a little extra cash.” This illicit information crawled up from the depths of society, bit by bit. “And right now, this is all that’s trending in the Masquerade. Take a look.”

The footage he played was pretty crisp for something that was circulating underground.

Despite it being filmed by an amateur, the camera angles were quite refined, accurately capturing the movements of the subject.

“Wait…!” cried Mei.

“This video is from back then. When did they take this…?!” Kei asked.

Both girls blanched as they watched video after video.

Holding the tablet out, Narasaki pointed to the video like a teacher and said, “As you can see, this is the first incident—caused by the hit-and-run centaur. It’s quite gory to see a giant herbivore kicking people away and smashing up the carnivores who try to fight back. Power itself.”

The monster’s lower body was that of a horse, and her upper body was that of a slender woman.

Her track jacket was straining to cover her abnormally swollen muscles. The video had clearly been edited, with a mosaic being

placed over her school badge and such to obscure her identity.

Then there was a half-naked woman… She was drunk and looked to be in the middle of group sex.

She was a Holstein, having taken Monster Tonic to become a six-and-a-half-foot-tall Beastwoman who was entangled with men who were transformed into a variety of different carnivores. They were in the middle of tossing back drinks and taking turns having intercourse.

The hit-and-run centaur kicked her way in, literally running them down.

There was a sound like splitting fruit. Their skulls cracked like watermelon or honeydew slammed onto the ground, gray matter spilling. Screams and shouts rang out in the office at full volume as the culprit cried out wildly, chasing down even those who fled in confusion—trampling them as if she enjoyed it. It was the entire hit-and-run incident from start to finish.

Aside from the mosaics hiding personal information, the gory video was completely uncensored.

The splattering fountains of blood, the smashed bones, and even the organs spilling out—all of it was starkly exposed.

"…!!!" Kei went pale.

"My, do you feel sick? Are you all right?" asked Narasaki.

"Hey…! You chose greasy foods on purpose, knowing you were going to show this to us!" Mei glared at Narasaki, clenching her teeth to resist the urge to vomit.

But Narasaki smiled, unbothered. "Ha-ha-ha! Just a bit of mischief. Do refrain from vomiting as best you can. I don't want to clean up after. And there is one more. This recording has comparatively less gore, though a lot of action."

"…Is this one me?" asked Reiji.

"Ah, looks like it," Getsu cut in. "You basically can't tell what's going on, though."

The video he played next made Reiji and Getsu lean forward.

This one featured Reiji, Getsu, and Kei, who had been attacked in the second incident—the one with the rag wringer—as they escaped the scene.

It was clips of them fleeing to the bar district and fighting.

A pallid and skinny man in nothing but underwear did a big clap. It was amazingly destructive, warping space, smashing and pulverizing everything as if it had been put into a blender.

"It's mostly Reiji who's getting beat up. He's mist, so you can't really tell, though," said Getsu.

"…I'm relieved they preserved our privacy, but I'm not happy about this video," Reiji commented.

"After this, your counterattack succeeds, and the rag wringer is arrested, but that's not in this video. It just shows the rag wringer going wild and destroying things. It's edited to show off the Phantasm's power."

"Where did the video come from? There aren't even any clues?" Getsu asked, furrowing his brow.

Neru immediately answered, "Unknown. We'll investigate, but pinning down a source on the deep web is impossible."

"Yeah, of course. If you could find it easily, then there'd be no point in the deep web."

The diminutive secretary Neru was in charge of IT at Fantastic Sweeper. She possessed mysterious levels of technical skill, and she could even break through typical security to gain illegitimate access, but she still had limits.

"It's not impossible but real sketchy. Don't wanna do it."

"There's no need to force yourself, my talented secretary. Now then, what does my not-so-excellent staff think? Do you know who released this video and what their intent was?" Narasaki asked like a teacher putting forth a nasty question.

The young men and women restrained their nausea to consider.

"…It's an advertisement for the Tonic. It's the same thing as ads on video sites," said Mei.

"That's right. It's proof that the Mythic Tonic and the Phantasm Tonic—things that were thought to be urban legends—are in fact real," Kei agreed.

"So it's like showing off if you use that, then you can do all this?" Getsu added.

"…You're saying whoever uploaded this was no amateur. They

were a string-puller involved in the leak or the leaker themselves," Reiji finished.

Hearing the answers from the four of them one after another, Narasaki grinned and applauded.

"Excellent! Very good, everyone. It seems you can use your heads a bit, thankfully. By the way, unusually for the deep web, this video can be passed around for free. There's no information charge or permission needed for reproduction."

"So it's already spread?" asked Getsu.

"The influencers in the Masquerade…well, information brokers and sharp-eared gangsters and such are all talking about it. The recording has also been uploaded to video sites on the outside a number of times, then instantly deleted. Some reckless poster also tried to upload a version that was censored and covered in mosaics, but they were banned on the spot. The response was truly quick."

"In other words, important people don't want this spreading?"

"I'm sure they don't, but it's too late. Whether it's today, tomorrow, or within a few days, even random gangsters will know about it soon. Even if they don't understand the details, they'll know that a 'special' tonic that can turn you into a literal monster really does exist."

The hit-and-run centaur and the rag wringer were the aggressors who had appeared in the videos.

There was basically nothing planned about their behavior. One had stomped and killed drunks and street people out of a private grudge, and the other had taken the drug without being prepared for it and become unable to turn back, and so he had attacked people hoping that would somehow help.

"You could even say that the Tonic is an extremely powerful weapon. Considering the incredible amount of money and effort it must have taken to steal it from the research labs of BT head office with its tight security, the way it's been used has seemed far too sloppy," said Narasaki as he tapped on the raging monsters in the video on the tablet screen.

"But in the end, it was just stealth marketing. So long as they could cause a big incident, anyone would do. Then, by filming their

rampage and distributing the footage, they kick up the value of the Tonic."

The Tonic could turn anyone who took it into a literal monster.

Since there was now proof it existed, there were sure to be people who would want to get their hands on it, no matter what it cost them.

"Before this video, people would have thought of the Tonic as too good to be true. I can't call their methods ingenious, but they did achieve their goal."

"…You think?" Getsu cocked his head. "Isn't advertising at no risk ingenious?"

"In exchange, they've lost the element of surprise," Narasaki replied. "Making it public gives people time to create countermeasures. For example, what if instead of portioning out small amounts, they had everyone take the Tonic at once and had a group of Mythics and Phantasms go on a rampage?"

That brought a frown to Reiji's face. "We wouldn't be able to handle it. Even the military might not be able to."

"Exactly. But now that this footage is out, it's harder for the people behind the Tonic to create a large-scale disturbance by sending out all their forces at once. Do you understand what this means?"

"Their goal isn't simple destruction or violence… Is that it?" Kei, who had been quietly gathering her thoughts, slowly put them into words. "Instead of trying to spark violence, the culprit might be trying to produce a social change. While it feels roundabout, it might ultimately be the most direct way to do that."

"That's a nice read on the situation, Kei," said Narasaki. "I think it's something like that, too. Right about now, quick-witted villains will be in a frenzy trying to get the real Monster Tonic. Hell, it might be sold out already."

"That pisses me off to hear," said Mei. "…My junior died so they could film some dumbass ad?" You could sense the anger and frustration in her words, and her emotions were clear from the way she was clenching her fists and digging her nails into her palms.

"We know that it's a shitty ad," said Kei. "How's the investigation

progressing? Do you think we can find the culprit?"

"The investigation is underway as we speak. In fact, we've already acquired some information, so I'll share it with you now." Narasaki closed the video that had been on loop, and Neru took over from him, accepting the tablet.

She slid her finger along the touchscreen, bringing up someone's profile.

"Yasuo Arimoto, twenty-one years old. He's what you'd call…a petty gangster?"

He was a man with a sad bowl cut and a thin face.

It had to be a copy of his ID or something. He was facing forward with a bored expression, and his clothes were dirty.

He didn't look wealthy—in fact, he was at the bottom rung of society. The young man's disheveled air came across from even just this single photo, and Reiji, Getsu, and Kei all recognized him.

"…Is that the rag wringer?" Reiji asked.

"Ah, you're right," said Getsu. "That's his head, that haircut like a wilted mushroom!"

"That's him," said Neru. "Arrested for the aftermath of the Phantasm Tonic. Now he's in the hospital."

"Wait. Can I see it?" Kei leaned forward slightly, making pensive noises. She furrowed her brow, took a good look at the ID photo, and said, "He looks familiar. I think he's a customer who has come to the girls bar a number of times before."

"But he would have been a Beastman there. You can tell?!" Mei asked.

"When you work in customer service like us, customers are glad if you guess right about who they are when they change shape every time."

Having a once-in-a-lifetime experience or coming in for a first visit could be fun—but it was human nature to want to become a regular and have a closer relationship. Being that it was a girls bar, where the staff served customers in a sort of pseudo-romantic way, they would get good at recognizing people.

"The trick to recognizing someone is the eyes. It's common for people's eyes to have the same qualities, even after they transform

into Beastpeople."

"…Are you sure?" asked Reiji.

"I'm not dead certain, but I'm confident enough that I would bet a meal on it."

"That's pretty sure. Then do you remember what kind of customer he was?" Reiji asked.

Sifting through her memories, Kei answered, "He was from one of those non-yakuza organized crime groups. He was employed… I think he had an irregular part-time gig during the day, and at night, he would go out into the Masquerade. He often had several sketchy-looking friends with him."

In the Masquerade, where it was hard to identify individuals, it was unusual for people to move in groups.

But if they had connections in real life from the outside, it was no problem. Most people would go to school or work as ordinary humans, then head out into the Masquerade as Beastpeople after hours or on the weekends.

One wouldn't know what they were, couldn't identify who they were, and there was no authority to crack down on them.

The nastier someone was, the more they would stand to profit from the anonymity.

"The owner told me to watch out for him and his buddies since they caused trouble. There are a lot of people like that, but he emphasized that they were violent with girls in particular."

"Hmm. Did you serve him at the bar?" Narasaki asked.

"I can't really handle that type, so no. In fact, for customers like that, she was the one…," Kei trailed off hesitantly but then said it, not hiding it. "The hit-and-run centaur…Mai was the one who served them. To find a way to get revenge."

"That idiot," said Mei. "Hanging around idiots is just gonna make you an idiot, too. What the hell was she thinking?"

The next thing Neru showed on the tablet was a hospital bed.

Yasuo Arimoto, tied to a bed with restraints, was being questioned by someone who seemed to be the cameraman.

"—t the time, I thought that was how it was. I picked up a woman at that bar. She was talking about how she wanted some

crazy Tonic… And then that guy…some dude in weird old-fashioned clothes came to talk to us…!"

"…Old-fashioned clothes?" The questioner was using a voice changer and had a mechanical inflection.

But Yasuo Arimoto paid that no mind, his testimony spilling out as if he were talking to himself.

"I dunno…like cosplay? He had on weird clothes, like something out of a folk tale. At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I didn't know what the deal was, but I didn't question it."

Narasaki tapped the screen, and the video paused. "Kei, have you seen any people in traditional clothing? Like people who came to the bar or who you saw in the area?"

"I don't think so. If their outfit was that eccentric, I wouldn't have forgotten them, even if I only saw them once."

"True enough. And they weren't approached in the bar, but on the street nearby."

Narasaki touched the screen again, and the interrogation video resumed.

Looking out at the sky with vacant eyes, Arimoto continued to mutter his confession.

"He said he had a real crazy tonic he could give us if we wanted. I said he was creepy, sketchy, and dumb, but he gave us this weird smile. And he said, 'Just give it a shot.' *Then he handed us syringes and the product."*

"You accepted it?"

"I thought it was a good idea at the time…" Saliva spilled out the corner of the listless gangster's mouth. *"After that, she—the girl I was with—she took it, though I told her not to. There was this cracking sound, her bones…stretched. Then she had four legs… I was like, 'No way! Is this legit?' It was too crazy. I thought about giving it back, but it looked like what the Tonic did to you felt really good. Since the girl seemed like she really enjoyed running people down. So it made me want to do it, too—eeeeeeeeeeek!!"*

"—?!"

Mei and Kei flinched at the man's abrupt shriek.

Arimoto's eyes went so wide it seemed his eyeballs would pop

out, his tongue sticking out as he flailed. The restraint bed creaked, and his limbs turned purple from the straps digging into them. It had to hurt quite a bit, but he didn't even seem to feel it.

"Give it to me! Again! I want to be…the r-r-r-rag wringeerrrrr!!! The stuff! Gimme just a bit!!! Crushing living things… It feels so goooooooooooood!!!"

"Well, that's basically the gist. There's more footage, but do you want to see it?"

"…That's okay," said Mei.

"Me too," Kei agreed. "I feel ill…"

Leaning on each other for support, the two girls hung their heads.

Yasuo Arimoto, screaming madly, was a wreck of a man. The pleasure of the Phantasm Tonic and the power of a Phantasm had intoxicated his brain. He was lost and obsessed, wanting to go back, and even if he got better, with time, he would seek the power again.

"In their investigation, BT head office's medical department determined he was in a state practically identical to severe addiction. Truth drugs and other forceful interrogation methods haven't worked, and they've failed to learn anything beyond what's in this video," said Narasaki.

"…Can you even trust the information he's been forced to confess while in that state?" Reiji asked.

"It's our job to collect evidence to back up his testimony. BT head office has taken Arimoto into custody, and we cannot question him again. For the time being, this document has summarized all the information in the video." Narasaki tapped on the tablet some more.

A simple text came on screen, which Getsu peered at with interest, reading it aloud. "'He asked how to use a smartphone'…? Boss, what is this?"

"When the man in old-fashioned clothing gave Arimoto the Phantasm Tonic—the night that the hit-and-run centaur first appeared—he asked him how to use a smartphone in exchange."

"But even grandpas use them these days… Does the old clothing mean he's also technologically inept?"

"Perhaps. Arimoto agreed to the man's request, and a gangster

buddy of his who knew a lot about the internet, an acquaintance with some influence, told the sketchy guy a bunch of stuff about how to use some flea market app that's hard to pin down."

"You don't know the name and contact of the person who gave him this info?"

"No. With the effect the drug had on his brain, he doesn't remember at all."

Getsu got a bad feeling from his boss's response and shuddered.

"Whoa, what a pain… So wait, a flea market app? No way. Are they gonna sell the Tonic on the app?!"

"It's possible. The man apparently also asked about how to do online auctions, too. Neru immediately searched the relevant websites, but there still haven't been any clues."

A variety of illegal products circulated in the Masquerade.

This was a place where businesses didn't need licenses from the government. It was like the whole area was a black market.

They had everything from agricultural produce stolen from the countryside to junk people picked up, plus uncensored pornography and pirated material. Anything and everything was available, but finding customers who wanted it took some time.

"They can't post ads online or promote on social media, after all," Narasaki said.

"…So even if you've got the stuff, if you don't have customers who want it, then won't be able to make money?" asked Getsu.

"Yup. And that's where flea markets and auctions come in. That's something you often see the non-yakuza-affiliated gangs getting into."

From the public ones run by businesses to the members-only underground dealers on the deep web—contraband and illegal goods were bought and sold quite actively, but from the outside, there was hardly any way to know about it.

"There are tons of suspicious products out there. Just from a casual search, a few thousand results. Some auctions are invitation-only, making them difficult to investigate," said the secretary Neru, a serious look on her face.

Beside her, Narasaki was leaning back on the couch like it was

beyond him. “Now that even Neru has thrown up her hands, there’s no way the technologically illiterate like you and I could manage. What do we do?”

Then Reiji, who had been patiently listening so far, raised his hand. “Boss, where’s Arimoto’s phone?”

“He didn’t have it when he was arrested. I believe it still hasn’t been found.”

“Let’s look for it. If it’s true that Arimoto taught the dealer in traditional clothes how to use a smartphone, then Arimoto’s phone should show signs of the man’s whereabouts—like URLs of sites he normally uses or people he associates with.” Though the man himself had lost his mind, a machine would never forget. Reiji paused there, then continued slowly as if gathering his thoughts. “Even if the dealer is the kind of person who can wave off your doubts and talk you into doing things—even if he’s that slick—he would need introductions from acquaintances and information in order to make connections. It’s very likely that the dealer used his association with Arimoto to infiltrate the underground society of the Masquerade.”

So then…

“Arimoto’s phone will be a mountain of clues. Evidence of the dealer in traditional attire must be in there somewhere—in follows and likes on social media, people who have added him as a friend, or the names and bookmarks in the apps on the phone.”

“I searched what information is publicly available. Arimoto’s social media has basically no updates and no posts. His credit information is at rock bottom, and he tends to skip work. But despite this terrible situation, he’s never been hurting for money,” Neru told them—that information meant just one thing.

Yasuo Arimoto had been supporting himself not through legitimate means but through something shady.

In the Masquerade, where it was difficult to identify people, outside connections were a lifeline. Someone would always carry a phone to maintain those connections, and they would leave it somewhere safe or hide it.

“BT head office investigated Arimoto’s house, by the way. No

phones turned up," Narasaki supplemented.

Getsu continued, "So then maybe it's at the station? You'd normally leave your phone in a locker there."

"Gangsters like him don't like leaving records of them coming and going. Natsukibara Station is kind of like the front entrance to the Masquerade, but there are several back doors into the area. All you have to do is climb over the barricade in a back alley."

The Masquerade was a segregated space. Roads that led to the outside were cordoned off with barricades or fences.

But the barricades weren't that heavy. Beastpeople high on Monster Tonic could climb fences with their strength, and even breaking the barricades wasn't very hard.

"For those sorts of back doors, you normally have a buddy who's stationed at your hideout. That's to hide and protect your phone and personal belongings that connect to your identity on the outside. If that was also true for Arimoto…," Reiji surmised.

"Then his phone might be in the hideout of the gang he was in!" A daring smile came to Getsu's face as though he'd cornered his prey.

As if to conclude the discussion, the boss snapped his fingers.

"Sounds like a plan. Time to go to work, Special Permanent Beast gentlemen.

"Search for the gang and Arimoto's phone to get some clues on that dealer!"

"Got it."

"Sure thing!"

The order was given, and the Specials went off to pursue their target.

For the sizable reward and to prove they were worthy of remaining human.

— 02 Monopoly in the Lawless District —

"Sorry about this. Just a little…okay?"

"…?"

She cut off a few hairs of lustrous white fur from the Beveren rabbit.

In a basic changing room, Kei Kakiba put the clothing she'd been wearing into a locker and expressed some guilt toward the adorable sniffling rabbit as she opened her water bottle.

It was a very normal bottle—the type one used for mixing protein powder at the gym.

Inside was flat Monster Tonic, the Beastman transformation drug that was sold as an energy drink, plus a few types of catalysts that she'd measured according to her recipe. Now she just had to mix it up.

"A little ice and half a serving of vanilla ice cream. A little fruit juice, a bit of tofu, and rabbit fur…"

The combination was nonsense. Normally, anyone would toss a beverage made of those ingredients into the trash. The result was a liquid so gross it wasn't even funny—it might even be bad enough to make someone sick.

Cha-chack, cha-chack, cha-chack!

Kei shook the bottle with practiced motions. The ice inside agitated the contents, breaking it up and mixing it around.

She opened the bottle with a *pop*, revealing a thick white fluid with bubbles popping on its surface.

"This really doesn't taste good. Nothing I can do about that, though."

The color probably came from the vanilla ice cream. But the warm, faint waft of fermentation and animal smell was something else entirely.

The mystery fluid took courage to drink, and Kei Kakiba chugged it.

"…So thick. Couldn't it be a little easier going down?" She complained. "…!"

Her heart thudded.

"Ngh—!"

White fur, light like snowfall, grew on her hunched back.

Her muscles bulged, and her bones stretched audibly. Her limbs grew even longer, and she felt the structure of her head completely change—the strange sensation of her skull distorting.

There was no pain. It felt like kneading clay that had sensation in it. If a human were to experience a metamorphosis, like a caterpillar forming its chrysalis before becoming a butterfly, it would surely feel like this.

"Hah…haah, haaah…"

Sweat streaked through her white animal fur.

Mathematically, she was seventy percent human and thirty percent white rabbit—more humanoid than the typical Beastperson.

The fur that covered her whole body was thin from her neck to her chest, which exposed the swell of her breasts and the color of her nipples.

Her body, which had been beautiful and well-proportioned as a human, had become even taller. The perfect balance of the lines of her lengthened limbs and the balance of muscle and fat could even be called artistic.

On her modest, heart-shaped rear was a cotton ball tail, and her long ears had moved to the top of her head. There were rounded pads on the palms of her hands and bottoms of her feet, buried in fur. She was almost naked, save for gloves and shoes.

This was not a normal Monster Tonic transformation. That would have made her more animalistic and less humanoid.

She'd achieved this Beastperson form by taking one of her Tonics, which she'd made with unconscious mythic abilities—it would be vital for walking around in the Masquerade and carrying out this investigation.

"…I'm going to wear *this* as a disguise…? Really…? Am I being tricked?"

Beautiful, obscene, and dignified, Kei Kakiba—now a white rabbit

Beastperson—combed back her annoyingly messy hair as she pulled out the outfit that had been put in the locker for her.

Clothes rustled. Once transformed into a Beastperson and in different clothes, one abandoned their name, face, and decorum of the outside world, becoming a mere beast to prowl through the city.

This was Natsukibara—the Masquerade.

It was the bottom of the gutter of their controlled society, and after having finished their bit of partying there, the Beastpeople would have to head back to work.

*

The Fantastic Sweeper company building was in a busy spot not far from Natsukibara Station.

Long ago, its rent would have been quite high, owing to its proximity to the station. But this was the Masquerade now, and it was on a corner of what was known as Otaku Road, where the land could no longer be used by honest people. Thus the price of rent had been beaten down by dubious means…

"…Well, that's what I've heard, but I don't know the facts of the matter. Our apartment is close by, too," said Reiji.

"There's a convenience store, so that's nice, but there are iron bars in front of the register. The washroom there is also really gross, and there's never any toilet paper. It's safer not to go in. Like, it's bad," said Getsu.

Kei nodded. "Thanks. I'll make sure to avoid it."

Three Beastmen passed through the worn-down entrance.

It was past eight in the evening, and for the Masquerade, that meant the evening was young. Like the shopping districts of old, it was a city that never slept.

There was still some time before night truly fell. A werewolf with yellowish fur was the first to step out onto the street where various Beastpeople hurried to their goals—men who sought to enjoy the night and the women who served customers.

“Mei left in a taxi. So now what are we gonna do?”

Getsu Raisan—an original werewolf. He was fundamentally different from the people who happened to pull the canine version of Monster Tonic that was sold in vending machines.

Behind his fluffy and soft fur lay extremely developed muscles, giving him the aura of a wild animal. He was clearly of a different breed. He was not a wolfdog but a pure wolf—the sharp fangs of a nearly extinct species flashed in his maw.

“But anyway, Getsu, have you been working on your style a bit? That outfit isn’t bad,” said Reiji.

“Heh-heh, nice, right? When I went shopping with Mei, she picked this out for me. I bought these clothes with the pocket money I’ve been saving up here and there. New clothes really are nice!”

He wagged his tail, a sign of his great mood. Just like how a fierce wild animal would sometimes do something cute, the descendant of the werewolves of old was proudly showing off the clothes he’d just bought.

He was in what could be called streetwear, with slim-fit pants and a baggy top. The blond highlights over his gray fur were an accent beneath the visor of his very humanlike hat.

“You haven’t changed at all, though, Reiji. And you basically seem human,” Getsu said.

“There’s no helping that. I can’t take Monster Tonic. I’ll just hide my face with mist.” His partner, Reiji Kasumi, was hardly any different from usual, and he appeared human at a glance.

Mist leaked out from under his black mask, making a gentle spraying sound.

He must not have cared too much about his attire. He had on black skinny jeans with sneakers and a baggy parka. It all looked old and well-loved, giving him a raggedy impression.

“I’m their opposite,” Reiji said. “I overwrite my true nature with Human Tonic, which makes monsters into humans. I stand out a bit uncomfortably around here, but I try to make myself as invisible as I can.” Reiji kept his hood lowered, trying his best not to show his face.

At his side, Kei said, "…I can't really complain about borrowed clothes. But my outfit feels…a little obscene."

"It very much fits the area," said Reiji.

"Doesn't feel weird here at all. Though it's pretty damn risqué," Getsu agreed.

"Ugh…!!! This is your boss's fault! Is he trying to harass me or something…?!"

Once they were out of the Fantastic Sweeper building, a remnant of the old business district, they were immediately hit by the stench of the streets: the mixed juices of blood, excrement, trash, sweat, and sauces. Everywhere one looked, glaring neon lights sparkled, and a wide variety of Beastpeople—carnivore, herbivore, and reptile—were walking around in all different sorts of attire.

As if symbolizing their deviation from the controlled society, they were largely in casual styles.

A bull man walked along while crunching on a whole cabbage. He was wearing a tracksuit over nothing else based on the black fur puffing out from his open zipper. The squirrel girl who clung to his arm was in a liberal style—hot pants and just the top of a bikini, which was barely hiding her chest.

In this town, the dress code was freedom and depravity.

"You were wearing your school uniforms before, weren't you?" said Kei. "…Can't I wear mine?"

"This place is like our home. I mean, our address is around here," said Getsu.

"There won't be any social consequences for us if people see us visiting since we have no credit score anyway," Reiji pointed out. "But you, Kei, would lose your honor student status and wind up being branded a slut. You'd lose a lot."

"…You're right. Ugh…! I know that, but still…"

High school bunny girl, Kei Kakiba.

The costume she'd been given fit right into this town.

"I hear clothes like these were common back in the day," said Getsu. "I've seen it in old media."

"…Were the people back then freaks?!" Kei's voice rose, blushing as she tried to hide the contours of her body. She was in a tight-

fitting dress, made so that crossing bands of cloth would support her chest without any sleeves or collar, and a suggestively short skirt. The items exposed the youthful firmness of her figure and the thin fur atop it, whether she liked it or not.

"It makes you look crazy strong. It's nice! Plus it has a cyberpunk vibe! Straight out of an old manga!"

"I feel like she'd die right away in an outfit like that—it gives her zero defense. She'd be a side character with a tattoo of a treasure map or something."

"This is even skimpier than what I wear at work… I don't like putting on an outfit like this without getting paid."

"Being okay with it if you get paid is also pretty sketchy…," said Getsu.

The sexy dress and her shy body language were very enticing to male instincts.

Maybe it was because the Tonic made her more muscular and voluptuous.

She looked exactly like the ideal physical form depicted in 2D brought into real life: full breasts, wide hips, and a snatched waist. It was drawing lascivious looks from all over.

"You're attracting unwanted attention. Let's go somewhere else," said Reiji.

"Yeah, we haven't got much in the way of clues anyway. Kei—Wait, we shouldn't say your name. What should I call you?" asked Getsu.

"…Beveren. That's what I went by at the bar."

They chatted as they wandered the town.

There were no cars in the Masquerade. Beastpeople overflowed at the intersections, not caring what was street and what was sidewalk.

On the outside, their phones would have instantly given them interpersonal distance warnings, forcing them to leave the area.

But Beastpeople were freed from those sorts of troubles here.

A street vendor, probably operating his stall without permission, hawked to the thirsty people coming and going on the street.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon! They're cheap, cheap, cheap,

cheap, cheap, cheap! Peaches, peaches, peaches, peaches, peaches! Get your peaches! Lobster! We also have spiny lobster!!! How about melons? Melons, melons, melons, melons!"

"…They're selling clearly unripe fruit and vegetables for odd prices. Huh? What's going on there?" asked Kei.

"Oh, that? It's all sketchy stuff from sketchy places. Probably stolen or poached," Getsu replied.

"They used to do resale on flea market apps, but those were taken down. This is their only way to sell."

"This is the main street where people often come from the outside, so it's actually kind of nice here. Go down the back alleys, and there's lots of wild shit, like places selling expired convenience store lunch boxes or old guys who grow weird plants."

"Sounds like a good way to get food poisoning. And get caught up in something illegal…"

This sort of thing was a familiar sight to the local Special Permanent Beasts.

But to Kei, who had never been interested in going anywhere outside of her workplace, it was fairly unusual and looked strange.

"…The boss told me not to go near the back streets. It's a good thing I didn't," she remarked.

"That's the right choice. There's nothing good there," said Reiji.

It wasn't just the food. At one stall, a plump pig man who seemed experienced was selling extremely modified versions of figures that were elaborately reproduced with a 3D printer.

"Oh-ho! Whoa, dude! Y-you can see it all! That camel toe!!!"

"Isn't the molding on those thick thighs amazing?! Ahh, these are awesome. This gets me more turned on than a real woman…!"

Men gushed as they peered at the figures from below.

Beside them and beneath a blue-tarped street stall crowded with cheap coat hangers, a bored-looking dog-faced man with a mohawk was selling secondhand clothing and shoes to a moderate number of customers.

"Are those clothes stolen as well?" asked Kei.

"Some of them. That, or looted off people who died in the streets," said Getsu.

“That place sells personal protective equipment. Though Beastpeople are pretty strong just with their own physical abilities…,” Reiji added. It made sense; this was a rough town where violence was never far away. “There’s a demand for self-defense items that make you feel stronger just by putting them on. They’re illegal if you take them outside, but you just have to leave them in shops or in the station lockers.”

A dog-faced man was tending a store while puffing out smoke that wasn’t from tobacco.

He was a short-haired breed with thin fur, and he wore an old leather jacket over his naked upper body. The jacket seemed normal at a glance, but its size had been adjusted to be looser to fit a Beastman’s frame, and you could see the lining had been redone.

“They put in thin, lightweight armor, and the lining is a stab-proof fiber,” said Reiji. “It can block some teeth and claws. That much is fairly normal for petty gangsters who get into fights.”

“Guys love weapons, after all…,” Getsu said. “There are dudes walking around with swords and stuff, too. But it’s faster just to punch someone, and it’s generally hard to use weapons in Beastperson form, so they’re mostly just decoration.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Kei. “Why not use guns when there are no laws here?”

“Some do want to.” Reiji’s gaze swept the vulgar town, prompting her to look in the same direction.

“Mister, are you buying that? You can’t take it home, and you’ll get arrested if you take it outside,” a shopkeeper warned one of his patrons.

“Wait, wait, wait, ahhh! I wanna take it hooooooome!!!”

“I get that, I get that. On the outside, you can’t even own one… Take your time looking. Next week, some friends are having a survival game party in an abandoned building. Wanna join?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah! I can finally use my imperial army equipment. The Masquerade rocks!!!”

There was a weapons stall like a wagon partitioned by wire mesh. A warthog man wearing headphones was showing a rugged rifle to a gun fanatic who seemed to have just come from the outside.

"Is that the real thing?" asked Kei.

"It's a replica, though it can shoot bullets that will hurt somewhat. It's like an airsoft," said Reiji.

"Since guns are banned on the outside but okay here, we often get fanatics here who do those, like, what are they called? Survival games?" Getsu explained. "They shoot each other in ruined buildings around here."

"That's shocking. But…perhaps that's better than using them as weapons."

"Well, illegally manufactured guns and smuggled firearms *do* circulate here, too," Reiji said, "but…"

Though this town was lawless, the residents were strays from a super-controlled society.

Common sense was fairly static and difficult to oppose, as was the foundation of the rules that dictated human behavior.

"Guns are taboo even in this city. They're not the sort of weapons casually brought to a fight."

Guns had been regulated for so many years in their country that there was a deep-rooted sense that they were forbidden.

On the other hand, imitation weapons like airsoft and model guns were free to own—but if someone brought out a real gun in a petty fight or conflict, people would judge them harshly.

"Does that mean that it's dangerous for a Beastperson to get shot, too?" asked Kei.

"Nah," said Getsu. "Good fighters can dodge bullets and stuff."

"Their physique and the strength of their muscles and bones are different from humans. It's difficult for them to incur fatal wounds," Reiji added.

Just as the two of them had said, guns were about as practical as other weapons, but—

"It's simply that people aren't familiar with guns in this country, so we can't make proper use of them. We can shoot, but we wouldn't hit anything," Reiji said. Though there was the advantage of a long-range attack, masters in fighting preferred close-range combat, which was more reliable. "Besides, pulling out a gun is a declaration of your intent to kill the other person. Trying to injure

someone is a common enough occurrence, but people are going to avoid you if you actually try to kill someone."

"And if you screw up, and the outside finds out you carry or use a gun, your life is over. The risks are too high," said Getsu.

"If you're just playing with toys, it's fine, though," said Kei. "But you can't always get what you want."

"That's how it goes," said Reiji.

Watching the fanatics chattering with excitement out the corners of their eyes, the three of them walked on.

One of the things that made this district special was that visitors could engage in hobbies and interests that were illegal on the outside. It wasn't just about drinking and getting rowdy.

People who had enjoyed these activities before they were banned were as excited as kids to get to do them again in the Masquerade.

"I hear that long ago, this area was a place where people like that gathered," said Reiji.

"Really?" asked Kei.

"There were also maid cafés, multilevel marketing schemes, and art scams. In the end, only the maids were left."

"I don't get what that means."

"Yeah," said Reiji. "That's what I thought when the boss told me about it, too."

The pandemic disaster had changed the course of human history and killed hundreds of millions of people.

People had vanished from old Natsukibara, where hobbyists had gathered, and tenants had vacated.

So they had made use of the ghost-town-like void, cordoning off the whole area of the city to make it a special district.

The concentration of businesses that dealt in those sorts of forbidden goods led to this place being nicknamed "Otaku Road."

It was one of the safer places in the Masquerade, a prime location where lots of visitors gathered.

"By the way, where are we headed?" Kei asked Reiji, who was walking in the lead.

He turned back to her a little awkwardly. "…Nowhere in particular."

“What?! But you’re totally walking in the lead. You’ve got nothing?!”

“We have no clues. I was thinking if we saw someone who looked like a gangster, we’d beat him into talking, though.”

“That’s like those random acts of violence some attacker would do.”

“Hmm…,” Reiji hummed, unable to deny it. But it was a fact that they had nothing worth calling a clue. “I wish we’d gotten some actual information out of the rag wringer.”

“But the company took him away, man. Wouldn’t the group he associated with have a hangout? People must have seen them somewhere, right? Um, Beveren,” Getsu said, not expecting much.

Beveren, aka Kei, mulled it over. “…Well, I can think of one thing,” she answered.

““For real?!”” both of them cried out.

Ignoring their reaction, she spun around. The motion showed off her long legs and tight butt. It was an alluring sight, that preposterous figure of hers like the proportions of a 2D woman made real.

“Now that I think about it, those guys often visited the building where I used to work.”

*

The place still smelled burnt.

After the fight between Mythic Beast and Phantasm—Reiji Kasumi and the rag wringer—President Narasaki had intervened to repair the street where the two had clashed, but the brothel that had caught fire from the girls bar on the ground floor remained charred.

On the second and third floors of the building were a lingerie pub and a host club, and on the fourth floor was an illegal casino and mahjong parlor. The collection of services called to mind the brothels of yesteryear. There had been many clients and staff inside the place when it caught fire.

"It's full of witnesses, right? With things like that, if I were to repair things, I'd never be able to keep them all quiet," Narasaki had said when the fire had broken out. Though he was a magus with control over ancient magic, he had refused to help.

Reiji had gone straight to the scene, but he didn't have access to his abilities since he had only just taken the Human Tonic, so Getsu had taken charge of putting out the fire and saving people, keeping damage to a minimum. Still, the girls bar was basically entirely burned out.

The concrete was blackened and cracked. Someone must have already fished through the scorched, warped utensils and surviving booze bottles, which were empty and appeared to be tossed aside.

"Man, nothing's even been picked up," said Getsu.

"The owner's dead, and the building didn't have fire insurance," Kei explained.

They were about a ten-minute walk from Otaku Road, where the Fantastic Sweeper office was.

In front of the yellow tape that sloppily cut across the burned-out entrance, the three of them gazed at the charred ruins.

"Your boss might as well have fixed this place, too. He can use magic, can't he?"

"It wouldn't be a good idea to let the public know about Mythic Beasts," said Reiji.

There had been dozens of people on the scene at the time of the fire, customers and staff included. It would have been unrealistic to keep all of them from talking.

"Is that right?"

"It'd be trouble if we went viral," said Reiji. "This isn't a line of work where fame will benefit you."

"…You're too damn practical."

At the end of the day, that was just how it was.

"If they learn about our abilities, they'll find ways to counter them. Some would try to use us, too. While neither could be done easily, it's best to avoid pointless risk."

It's not like we don't want to help people, Reiji thought.

But he didn't want to put himself at too much risk to save others.

"It generally takes two people to save one person. It's difficult to save someone who doesn't have the strength to support themselves. I'm not going to try helping someone if I'm not really prepared for it or act like I saved someone just so I can feel good about it."

"So is someone like Mei the exception?"

"Even if she couldn't walk, she'd blast along upside down on her hands. Exceptions are exceptions."

Despite being Mythic Beasts with unusual powers, the Special Permanent Beasts were still basically at the lowest rung of society.

They had no money. They had no status. They were just barely able to get an education.

"The stairway to a normal life is long and steep. I can't make things even harder for myself," Reiji said in a detached manner.

"I won't blame you for that. But…" Kei eyed him calmly. "It must be hard for you."

"Nah. I'm used to it. Why would you think it's hard?"

"Because it hurts to make that choice, and it's exhausting. Especially when you understand the weight of human lives."

Whether to help someone or not—

—Kei thought it was an agonizing decision to make.

"That's why I figured it'd be difficult. I'm sorry if I had the wrong idea, though."

"…Yeah, you do."

Just leave it at that, Reiji thought.

As the two of them stood there, feeling understood yet also keeping their distance…

"You two sure are friendly," said Getsu.

"Not really," said Reiji.

"We don't get along at all," said Kei.

"Naw, you're so on the same wavelength! I totally feel like I'm being left out here!" the wolf man with blond streaks in his fur groaned. With a lonely look on his face, his tail drooped out from the hole in his pants.

Just then, someone shouted.

"Don't fuck with me!"

It was a common sort of outburst, loud and meaningless.

Not far from the burned-out shell of the girls bar were the elevator and stairs of the building. From the hallway that led to the business on the upper floor came the dramatic sound of something being kicked away, followed by multiple people moving.

“““……?”””

Reiji silently raised a finger in a *shhh* gesture. Sensing that he meant, “Follow me quietly,” Kei and Getsu nodded, and they carefully went up the stairs, keeping their footsteps silent, peering around the corner at where the sound was coming from.

“We *told* you to get out!!!”

Ahead of them were three commonplace dog men who must have transformed with some Carnivore Tonic, wearing expressions like someone would use for a thumbnail on a video website.

They looked and sounded very much like petty gangsters, and they were harassing someone.

“So then bring that new owner of yours over here.”

Opposing the gangster dogs was a Beastman in a wine-red suit and a bright shirt.

He was quite large, with fluffy and curly brown bangs.

Cute ears popped out of his head, and he had big round eyes. He was a marsupial in formal clothing—a kangaroo Beastman with a strangely adorable, fanciful face and a macho physique—and glared at the dog men.

“If they come here in person and go through the proper channels to get me to leave, then I’ll be happy to make myself scarce, ’kay, hon? But look…” He got in front of the host club sign, blocking the threatening men’s way. “…if I rolled over for every brat who has petty thugs do things for them, then I would’ve stopped doing business in this town a long time ago. Got a problem with that, lowlifes?!”

“”…*Hyeeep*!””

The gangsters visibly flinched at his strange intensity.

The effeminate way he spoke struck Reiji with déjà vu, and he quietly asked Kei, “That guy seems really familiar. Is that kangaroo connected to your late boss?”

“You got it. He’s the most longstanding of his subordinates. Runs

the third and fourth floors. They call him Mr. Garoo."

"They're so similar. Basically the same dude, come on…," Getsu muttered in exasperation. The macho rabbit man boss and the marsupial with bulging muscles—they had so much in common that he wouldn't have been surprised if they were related. "There's no way he's a kangaroo every time. Is he using a special Tonic or something?"

"No, it's natural. Apparently, he gets kangaroo just about every time he takes the Herbivore Tonic."

"That doesn't make sense…"

"Sometimes that happens. There are people who tend to become dogs and people who tend to become cats. You hear lots of stories."

As they were talking, a fistfight was breaking out between the dog men and the kangaroo man.

"Pretty full of yourself, eh, fag? Guys, get hi—erk?!"

"H-he's good… Whoa?! Owwww!!! My nose, my nooose…!"

"O-ow… It's broken…"

They heard repeated strikes and pathetic shrieks in between their remarks. The men were ignoring Reiji, who was on the stairs, leaning and looking up at the wall. Getsu and Kei were peeking around the corner.

"Even without the Tonic, Mr. Garoo is two meters tall. He's a former heavyweight amateur boxer."

"Makes sense he's strong, then," said Getsu. "Ah, that dog man's nose is bleeding."

"Looks like it's broken… It hurts just to watch," Reiji commented.

"You bastard, I'll kill you… *Yelp*!"

A couple of nasty cracks rang out, and the three dog men were overwhelmed, holding their noses after Mr. Garoo got them with his jabs.

A canine's most important sensory organ is its round, wet nose. They're so packed with nerves that even a light jab to the area could have a dog man sniffling.

Mr. Garoo launched jab after jab at his opponent's noses with deadly accuracy. Kangaroos were natural boxers, and no amateur could keep up against one who knew how to make the most out of

his inborn techniques.

"Men who always pick carnivore because they want to be stronger are such amateurs."

The violent kangaroo's suit was dotted with blood that blended in with the wine-red fabric of his outfit.

He briskly wiped the blood off his fists with a white handkerchief, smiling boldly. "If you ask li'l ol' me, those long noses of yours are just begging to get hit. Plus, they're *sooo* sensitive that getting hit hurts twice as bad. Can you even put up a fight like that?"

"…You piece of shit… I'll kill you!!"

"Oh, honey, what're you bringing out now? Using a knife isn't going to—good LORD!"

The massive kangaroo's voice suddenly went falsetto as he begrudgingly shrank back.

Reflected in his eyes was one of the dog men—taking out an old handgun.

It had to be an antique because it smelled sharply of gun oil. The muzzle had clearly been scraped free of rust, and the gun shook with agitation as the dog man took aim.

"You're *kidding*. A gun?! Do you think you'll get away with pulling out real heat?!"

"Shut up! There are no rules in this town. You start a fight, and I finish it. That's how it goes!!!" Blood dripped from the dog man's broken nose. His eyes were entirely red, hungry for bloodshed. "Die."

"Noooooooo!!! S-someone!!!"

The moment the dog man grinned sadistically at the frightened kangaroo—

"That's as far as it goes. Stop him, Getsu."

"Copy that, partner!"

"…Huh? Agh?!"

Right as the dog man pulled the trigger, Getsu, who'd sneaked up from behind, twisted the man's arm.

He pointed the arm holding the gun toward the roof, wrenching it around and causing intense, numbing pain. The gun fell from the man's hand, but right before it touched the hard ground, a mist like

dry ice raced out to catch it.

"Oh!" the kangaroo man in red cried out in a voice that was both deep and shrill. Breath catching, he fixed the werewolf with a passionate stare. "Absolutely fabulous! Where are you from? I could fall for you!"

"…I don't swing that way! Though I'm glad you're okay!"

"Gah…ugh…?!" The dog man in Getsu's grip passed out, tongue dangling from his mouth.

Getsu had knocked him out with pressure to his carotid artery—a sleeper hold.

Instantly, the remaining two dog men cried out, "Wh-what the hell are you?!"

"Doesn't matter. Just get the hell out of our way!"

"Hey, hey, hey. It's normal to stop a guy who pulls something like that," said Getsu.

"A military handgun made on the continent, imported during the old days. This isn't something to fuck around with," Reiji added.

The white fog that crawled along the ground swelled like cotton and instantly enveloped the gun.

It was swallowed up as if by a sea of clouds, and even if you wanted to pick it up, you wouldn't be able to see where it was.

"What?!" The dog men turned around. "Why, you…!!!"

One reached under his jacket and tried to pull out a hidden gun, but…

"Too slow."

The gun was designed to be compact and easy to handle.

A trained individual would have been able to draw and fire it at a moment's notice. But an amateur who wasn't used to handling guns would inevitably catch the weapon on his clothing simply trying to pull it out—just as the dog man had done now.

"Geh?!"

"Urgh!"

The two thugs cried out practically simultaneously. White fur glowed under the unnatural, harsh lighting.

A leather shoe sank into the side of one of the dog men's faces. Heedless of how her skirt was flying up, Kei rushed in to hit him with

a clean kick, breaking one of his back teeth as she smacked him away and sent him tumbling.

He slammed into the wall and passed out, eyes rolling back.

Right about the same time, the last man was being finished off.

"Monochrome Mist Style: Black Glue."

The white mist turned black. Sliding from the cuffs of his pants, Reiji's mist instantly darkened to become a slimy muck that coiled around the inside of the dog man's clothes, fixing him in position with his illicitly manufactured firearm half-drawn.

"Ah, aghhhhhhhhhh?! I-I can't move! My clothes! They've gone all stiff! Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"It's no big deal. Just think of it as instant jelly adhesive."

Reiji's mist hissed as he vaporized. That mist was a part of a Brocken's body, which was made up of ultra-fine droplets.

Those droplets hardened inside the clothing of the three dog men, freezing them in unnatural poses.

"Calm down. If you flail around, it won't just be your hair getting ripped off. Your skin will go, too. It'll hurt," said Reiji.

"Huh…?!"

For fur-covered Beastmen, that would be unbearable.

Their fur stuck to the clothes, and whenever they moved, they felt the agony of it ripping out from the roots.

Once Kei had made sure the last thug had lost the desire to resist, she let out a sigh. "I'm no good at action, but when I'm with you two, I feel like I could get uncomfortably used to it."

"Get used to it," said Reiji. "Unlike the staff of a girls bar, we sell ourselves more on violence than charm."

"Sounds dangerous. If you have the freedom to choose a new job, I recommend it."

"I feel the same, but we don't have that luxury. Also…" Tossing the three disabled dog men to the ground, Reiji picked up the handgun that had been hidden in the white fog and addressed one of them. "A second ago, I was saying that no one would be stupid enough to try to use a gun in the Masquerade…and then suddenly, you dumbasses go and bring one out. Now it looks like I was spewing a bunch of horseshit. You've made things real awkward for

me.”

“Th-that wasn’t our fault—huh?!”

Reiji walked up to the dog man, who was as still as a statue, the inside of his clothing all stiffened up.

Keeping his finger off the trigger, he placed the gun to the gangster’s fuzzy head, “There’s something I want to ask. So start blabbing before you get hurt.”

“Hng!” Teary-eyed, the dog man nodded multiple times.

Reiji wasn’t actually going to shoot, but the gun seemed to work well enough as a threat.

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“Aww, what fabulous pectorals! They’re pumped with vivacious youth! Sexy! It’s like you’re trying to seduce me!”

The kangaroo man was snuggling up against Getsu on a high-quality sofa of real leather, enraptured.

“I’m doing no such thing!” Getsu yelped. “Hey, back off! Stop being so pushy. It’s scary!!!”

“Playing hard to get, huh? But I like that! Can I stuff a ten-thousand-yen bill into your underwear?!”

“…I almost want to say yes! I do, but no! Hey, come on! Help me out, Reiji!!!”

With the other man nuzzling his chest through his shirt, Getsu tensed and pushed him away.

It had been about an hour since they’d sent the dog men who’d picked a fight packing.

They were inside the bar at the host club, which was still temporarily closed due to the fire, though it should have been busy with customers and hosts. Some drinks and snacks had been placed on the table where the kangaroo man, Getsu, Reiji, and Kei were sitting.

“What are we going to do with them?” asked Kei. “The police won’t come to this part of town.”

“We’ll contact the company and have them come get the thugs,”

said Reiji. “They imprison them until the Tonic wears off, and once they turn back, we investigate their identities based on their faces.”

After questioning the dog men and getting some information out of them, Reiji and company had left them tied up on the floor. The thugs were out cold, but their lives weren’t at risk.

Tucking the notepad where he’d written down the information they’d learned into his pocket, Reiji picked up a glass of iced cola and tilted it to his lips. “This is good.”

“Drinks are surprisingly expensive,” said Kei. “Though I drank lots at work before.”

“That’s a luxury all on its own. I bet you could get calories that way.”

“I didn’t drink alcohol since I’m a minor. I fooled them with non-alcoholic drinks that looked like booze.”

Unlike Reiji, who was restless for some reason, Kei was calm, as if she were used to this. She held a glass in both hands, spinning it a little. That childish gesture was charming, but it failed to captivate the boy next to her, as he was busy enjoying the stimulation and sweetness of the carbonation.

“Kaki— I mean, Beveren,” said Reiji. “Do you often come to places like this?”

“Hardly. Money is for saving, not for spending. And I’m the one serving the drinks.”

“Of course. Since we’re being treated, though, it would be rude to turn these down.”

They snacked on the light dishes offered along with the drinks—a fruit plate and frozen fries that would be a few tens of thousands of yen if ordered from the club menu. Since they had just chowed down at the company, however, they weren’t very hungry.

“What a waste,” said Kei. “…Anyway, we were able to get a lot out of those guys. Are you heading back soon?”

“After we take a break and get the boss to pick up the thugs,” said Reiji. “It’d be a hassle if they got away after we left, and on the off chance that they got violent and hurt someone, we’d have guilty consciences.”

“You’re basically acting in place of the police. Even though you’re

cleaners," said Kei as she sat beside him, drinking in a childish manner, a glass of vegetable juice held in both hands.

"*Taking out the trash* is what cleaners do. It's basically part of the job description. So…" Reiji shot a look out the corner of his eye at Getsu, who was practically being knocked over by the kangaroo man leaning against him.

"Will you stop flirting and listen to what Reiji has to say? This isn't for fun, Getsu."

"I'm not having fun, and I'm not flirting! This guy is actually trying to shove a ten-thousand-yen bill in my pants!"

"Oh-hoh-hoh! ♪ Pardon me. I got carried away. Seeing such a vivacious young man made me lose my head." Breathing a heated sigh, the kangaroo man pulled away, leaving cash in Getsu's underwear.

"Urgh…I feel dirty… Oh, I'm glad to get money, though…"

"Oh, you really saved me," said Mr. Garoo. "If you hadn't come, Bevvy, I might have been at the mercy of those men. I owe you my life!"

"…I kinda don't think that would've happened," Getsu muttered.

"My heart would have been ravished. The girl inside me would have died if I'd given in to those people!"

"How would I know about that?! The hell kinda standards do you have?! Scary!" The kangaroo man's declaration made Getsu lose the urge to argue.

As the boys were averting their eyes, not digging too deeply into that, Kei was off to the side, carrying on the conversation with a wry smile. "I'm glad I could see you, too, Mr. Garoo. Are you going to keep running the club?"

"I did plan to…but the situation has changed." Drawing a swirl on the table with a finger and sighing listlessly, the kangaroo man said, "Do you know the son of the late owner?"

"…I just happened to see him at the funeral, though we didn't speak."

"The owner married when he was young. His wife cheated, and they divorced, but custody of his only son went to his mother… Since a father running a nightlife business can't raise a child, they said." It

was an extremely prejudiced judicial decision. But once the decision had been made, there was no way to oppose it. "So his son was raised by the parents of the owner's ex-wife, who just took a big cut in child support. Apparently, he couldn't even send a single video or email, and he was only able to meet his son once he was over twenty."

"…That's pretty awful," said Getsu.

Soft drinks were set out to fill the silence.

While clinking the ice floating in the cola poured for him, Getsu looked conflicted as he said, "I don't know my parents' faces, either, but if I knew where they were, I'd really wanna see 'em."

"Right? When he got his wish and was reunited, the owner was so happy. But…"

On the special night when he was allowed to see his son again, his twentieth birthday—

"Apparently, his son hit him out of nowhere. Asked him why he hadn't come to see him until now and asked him why he abandoned him. Said that if he loved him, he should have forced his way back into contact somehow."

"…Come on, what the heck?" The words left Reiji's lips abruptly. "He was telling his dad he should have stalked his ex's family? That wouldn't hold up in court."

"From an outsider's perspective, of course, but the owner was a kind man, so…" He had been very hurt by his son's remarks. "His son pressured him into sharing some of his estate by way of an apology. He had the bar, and though he apparently refused, he was harassed about it many times after that."

"…I never knew," said Kei. "We never saw that at the girls bar."

"He kept it a secret from the staff. He didn't want to make them worry over his private life. And his son didn't want to see him in person, so he got some non-yakuza gangster lackeys to pressure him."

More of that sort, on top of the gangster who had become the rag wringer, Yasuo Arimoto, and his group.

"Gangsters, huh?" said Getsu. "…Could that son be connected with Arimoto?"

“Now that you mention it, the wife did say something about real estate. Do you remember, Beveren?” asked Reiji.

“…Yeah, she did. She mentioned it had been taken away before she could inherit it, like it had been stolen.”

“Really? He went that far? So then the son actually does have the title deed for the building?” The kangaroo man let out a deep sigh as if he’d received a death sentence. “The people that you all dealt with, they’re gangsters the son hangs around with. I guess he’s trying to do business in town, but it very much isn’t of a legitimate sort.”

“So the son of the late owner took out the documents related to land ownership from the inheritance. And he’s using that as the basis to get his underlings to try to evict you,” Reiji summed up.

“But there was just a fire here. Is it worth doing all this over a burned-up building?” Kei asked.

The kangaroo man nodded. “It is. The special district is large, but there’s only a limited number of buildings and land in good condition.” That was true even if they had cordoned off a whole district of the city. “The location is great since it’s so close to the main street. Even selling off just the land dirt cheap would make you hundreds of millions. The building’s been damaged, but it’s nothing that can’t be rebuilt or renovated.”

“H-hundreds of millions…?!”

“If you walk around the back streets, there are street stalls all over, right? There are a lot of people who want to do business here, but they can’t get the land or the space in a building, despite there being ruins all over the place.”

“Those places don’t have any electricity. And it’s hard to get gas or plumbing, too,” said Reiji.

To get through the procedures to build infrastructure, one needed connections with the outside.

As cleaners, Reiji and Getsu were familiar with both sides of this district, so it was nothing they hadn’t heard before.

“Still, there are little tricks you can use,” Reiji continued. “Like connecting water and sewage without permission or using propane gas. For power, it’s not impossible to use a private generator or solar,

but that will cost you."

Small street stalls aside, even in the Masquerade, one needed status on the outside to conduct large-scale business operations. That meant money that had flowed to illegitimate trade would be returned to the legitimate world through applications and taxation.

"I didn't know that," Kei said honestly. Since she had only been staff, she wasn't privy to that kind of information.

"There's no way you could have…," said Mr. Garoo. "But that means we'll be closing up shop, too."

"Hearing you and Reiji talk, I feel like it would be better for you to keep running the shop rather than letting the son do it. Not that I understand any of the hard stuff here," she said.

"Oh my! Thank you, dear. But this is a matter of principle."

Even though the building was basically stolen, it did make sense for the owner's living relative to inherit the property.

And since he was the new owner, the son had the final say in who stayed and who went.

"If he comes himself, then I'll agree to leave," said the kangaroo man. "Though I feel bad for my staff…I think that's the proper course when dealing with the owner's living relatives."

"…I understand that, but…" Kei glanced over at Reiji.

Noticing this, he finished his drink and said, "I doubt those people will run the business as decently as the previous owner. And besides…" After a faint sigh, he continued, "They're in the same group as the guy who killed the owner. If the son was involved in a murder or suggested they do it…shouldn't we investigate that possibility before deciding our course of action?"

"No way! It couldn't be…! Well that's what I'd like to say, but he really does seem the type." The kangaroo man writhed in anguish, acting kittenish in his distress. "But how do you plan on investigating that? These are people who are packing heat, and I don't like seeing young kids get into danger. And you can't call the police around here."

"We have business with them, too." It was ultimately like a side trip, Reiji told him. "The people we caught are lackeys who have only recently joined up with each other. They were just messengers

sent to harass you. I don't know what went on behind the scenes, but they did tell us where their hideout was. We were planning on going there now anyway."

"Business, hmm? So then should I make a request of you, too?"

"Getsu's already accepted that. Via his underwear," said Kei.

"Huh? This? Isn't this consolation money for sexual harassment or a service fee?!"

"I don't mind that, either."

Looking back and forth between his partner and the kangaroo with a grossed-out look, Reiji said, "So basically, you sold the right to stuff money into your underwear."

"No way! Absolutely not!" Getsu howled.

"Oh me oh my, how fabulous! I'd love to have you, Getsu. Why not work as a host for me instead? Your muscular beauty and naïveté will be sure to get you clients! I might just pick you as a favorite myself!"

"Come on, give me a break, for real! Thirty thousand is too cheap for selling those rights!"

"Then get used to working," said Reiji. "Besides, all he really did was listen to us."

Getsu pulled the crumpled cash out of his underwear like he was reluctant to part with it.

In front of the exasperated Reiji and the icy-looking Kei, he sighed in resignation. "Acting like it's not even your problem… Mr. Garoo, Reiji's a handsome guy. Won't he do?"

"I like the cute type. I don't know about cool boys… Oh, but maybe he could work. It might be nice to have both of you as a set, one on each arm…tee-hee."

"…You didn't have to say that! Now I'm in trouble!!!" said Reiji.

"You're the one who tried to sell me off to Mr. Trouble over there! Don't ignore that!"

As the two of them were going off at each other, Kei interrupted them with an exasperated look. "You two sure are close."

""We're not!!!""

The two Specials denied it at exactly the same time.

"…Anyway, I'll go report to the company where we're going. Mr.

Garoo, where's your phone?" asked Reiji.

"It's behind the counter. Go ahead and use it."

"Thanks. I'll just make a quick call. Excuse me."

Leaving the others, Reiji picked up the phone that was installed near the counter where people paid.

Tapping in the number he'd memorized, he made sure he heard the dial tone. He waited for it to connect.

"…What a pain!"

"What's going on now?"

"Sorry, Neru. I can't help but feel that way now that I'm using a cell phone regularly on the outside."

The Masquerade was highly inconvenient.

While this arrangement was necessary to keep information from leaking to the outside, having all information networks aside from phone lines be almost entirely unserviced was just like primitive times, compared to how you could connect to the internet anywhere and anytime on the outside.

Even cell phones wouldn't connect properly. WiFi signals didn't reach. All they had to contact people were landline telephones in stores like this or phones installed at street corners.

"I really get the irritation. I can't escape the light of civilization."

"Is that why you don't leave the office? What kind of lifestyle are you living?"

"A private one. So what do you want? If you need the boss, he's slacking at the moment."

"…No surprise there. We've secured some idiots who pulled guns at Kei Kakiba's former workplace, the building where the fire was. Please retrieve them. It seems like the former owner's son is involved…" He explained what had happened, and Neru made listening noises on the other end of the line.

"Got it. In other words, you're going to go break into their hideout now?"

"That's the plan. Do you have anything that could help us?"

"I do. Do you know about the Black Tower Casino?"

"…The building stands out, so I know the place."

It had been sealed off in the confusion of the pandemic. The

cluster of infections that occurred inside had caused many deaths.

In the wake of the residents' deaths, the area was designated as a special district, and after various complications, it was bought by a company from the outside. Now the high-rise apartment complex was well-known by locals as a hotbed for illegal gambling.

"Did their plumbing get backed up again?" Reiji asked. "I thought we warned them not to flush bodies."

"Three bodyguards were killed last night. They burned the bodies in drums out back, and the smell caused a fuss."

But in this town with no police, there weren't many places someone could report that.

It had been uncovered when the proprietor of a shop in the area had contacted Fantastic Sweeper.

"A hundred million vanished, and three bodyguards were killed in a power outage that lasted less than ten minutes. It's like someone stole a briefcase packed with bills from what amounts to a locked room."

"…What?!" That should have been impossible. It put Reiji on edge. "Were the bodies inspected? Has it already been done?"

"Head office's forensics team is on it. Though there's not much hope with them burned up."

"What's the likelihood that the Phantasm or Mythic Tonic was used?"

"Still unknown. But we inspected the office where it happened and made some discoveries." The receiver was silent for a moment. Then he heard an irritated tongue-clicking. *"…I can't even send you a video or image. This way of communicating is garbage. Antique. Trash it."*

"I understand the feeling, but please don't break the phone. So what were those discoveries?"

"The air conditioning at the scene is amateur work. The vents are a bit on the large size, though not big enough for a person to enter. The cover came off, and some pieces of head hair were discovered inside. Those are also being investigated."

Under normal circumstances, she would have wanted to send pictures of this. Hearing Neru's faltering verbal explanation, Reiji

asked, “So, you’re saying someone sneaked into the office from there and stole the money?”

“The cash case is just barely small enough to fit in the vent. But it would normally be impossible for someone to crawl through.”

“Normally,” in this case, included people in Beastperson form.

It wouldn’t have worked even with someone in the form of a small animal—a rat or squirrel Beastman, for example.

“When the money vanished, the illegal tour guide was furious and lost his head. Those responsible were sent to death games. The other witnesses were scared of getting caught up and ran. Unknown if they can be found.”

“So you’re saying we basically have no clues as to what happened at the time of the crime.”

“Yes. So we’ll make the bodies talk,” she told him in an innocent voice, so robotic it was scary. *“Head office’s forensics team is excellent. They can investigate the traces of bodies with greater accuracy than public safety organizations. They’ve already acquired shreds of fibers that seem to be linked to the cause of death. Results in a few hours.”*

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap!

Her keyboard clattered in a way that sounded deliberate, and he got the sense she was pushing up glasses she didn’t have.

“…I get that part, but why the little act at the end…?”

“Makes me happy. So is that all? If you’re waiting for forensics to do their work, then I’ll call you again later.”

“No. I have some info we got out of the guys we caught.” People who relied on violence were vulnerable to greater violence. The dog men had completely surrendered, tails between legs—it had only taken a little threatening to make them squeal. “We’ve located the base of the criminal group that the rag wringer—Yasuo Arimoto—was a member of. It’s right by the boundary of the Masquerade, in a building with a broken dental sign on it.”

“Searching. There it is. No manager, and no contracts for gas, electricity, or plumbing. Abandoned by owner. No nearby facilities in operation. Close to Kamimachi Street…the place where free love servicers hang out.”

"…Put it that way, and it sounds somewhat different from just prostitution."

"Oh, they do still have phone lines. They might connect. Should I look into the number?"

"Please do. Oh, and here's something else I learned…"

If one looked up into the night sky, they'd immediately see the wall that divided the Masquerade from the outside.

Just like cancer cells growing on an organ, the walls connecting the densely populated buildings and the movable giant barricades had formed near the center of the city. They were painted a plain dark green, giving them an eerie air.

But those could only be set up on the main roads. The smaller alleys were more or less cordoned off by simple chain links and barricades, but it wasn't difficult to get over them.

"Arimoto's group is made up of F-rank university students from the outside. They've been hanging around the Masquerade for some time and have rock-bottom credit scores. They can't get decent jobs, of course, so they started making money here."

Initially, they got their money by threatening the unlicensed prostitutes who worked Kamimachi Street. But it hadn't been enough cash for them to have fun with, so they'd moved on to more forceful methods, making inroads into the prostitution and nightlife businesses, which was where the big money was.

Said methods included bladed and melee weapons, guns, and…

"The Phantasm Tonic that Arimoto picked up. But it seems like he hasn't been able to get in contact with them since taking it, so we may not be able to get information from that angle."

As for how this was related to the mess over the owner's inheritance…

"The son was also a member of Arimoto's group. It's very likely that he was included in the contacts given to the string-puller. If we can get Arimoto's phone—"

"Okay, leave it to Neru. Lightning analysis, stripping 'em bare."

"Counting on you. Agh, I wish I could've been born normal."

Reiji couldn't understand what someone had to be thinking to throw it away so easily.

He didn’t know if it was karma from his ancestors or retribution for misdeeds performed in a previous life or what, but Reiji had been born a Mythic Beast, a descendent of monsters, forced to pay a price for a power he didn’t even want by living on the fringes of society without human rights.

“But those idiots could have lived normal lives.”

Why, when she—?

When Ikka hadn’t been able to…? He trembled in rage at that thought.

“Sorry, but calm down. Whoa, there.”

“…Excuse me. I just got a little irritated.”

Right before he’d started elementary school, the family disaster had occurred—the incident where he became a monster.

Though his little sister Ikka had defended him, the rest of his family had turned against him, imprisoning him in his room until they attempted familial suicide. The memories of that time were with him even now, an unforgettable nightmare.

But still—

“Work, work. Dirty and wet. But cool, hmm?” the secretary Neru said, being rather vague.

Reiji brought his mouth a little ways away from the receiver and answered, “I know. We’re useful, and we’ll prove that. Bye.”

“Got it. Call me laters.”

After that short farewell, she hung up the phone.

Reiji lightly smacked his cheeks to block out the bitter memories. *Snap out of it.*

He didn’t want to get dragged down by the past—by something he couldn’t change. If he messed up, there would be no second chances.

As a Special Permanent Beast, he just barely had human rights, and his position was incredibly precarious. If he showed he was incompetent, he’d be discarded.

He had to keep showing he was useful and that people like him had worth. He needed material to make his boss and head office decide he and Getsu were too valuable to throw away. If they kept doing that, surely…

He could survive, live, and fall in love.

I will live the normal life that you couldn't.

To smother his feelings, he erased all emotion from his face as he turned back around.

"Time to go, you two."

"Okay. Sorry, but we're in a rush!"

"Aww! ♪ How cold…but that's the thrilling part! See you again! ♪"

Leaving the kangaroo man as he twisted about coquettishly, Getsu rushed up to Reiji with comical speed. Kei got up from the sofa and followed, and the three of them opened the door of the host club and once again left into the night.

Little moths fluttered back and forth in the glow of a flickering fluorescent light. The concrete hallway had been cleaned, but not enough to get rid of the old grime on the walls and floor.

The trio's footsteps echoed through the empty hallway. "So apparently, four more of the gang members are going to be hanging around there tonight," said Reiji.

"…That many?" said Kei. "They must have guns, too. Won't it be dangerous?"

"Not just that. Last night, an incident happened where the Tonic might have been used."

There could very well be an ogre or giant snake waiting for them.

It'd be armed gangsters, a Phantasm, or a Mythic. There were three repulsive options, and the answer was—

"Don't worry, Bevvy. I'm feelin' pretty good tonight," Getsu said to the anxious Kei, pointing to the window with a fuzzy finger. Drum bonfires glowed here and there in the sordid district, revealing faint smoke and the haze of gas. Though the stars were practically invisible in the skies of the light-polluted city, there was one heavenly body shining bright enough to see. "After all, there's a nice moon out tonight," Getsu finished.

"Does that have anything to do with it?" Kei asked curiously as the three of them pattered down the stairs.

They were headed to the gang hangout, a shuttered dentist's office.

*

The moon was just slightly shy of full, shining down on the edge of the too-bright night city.

The vanilla vans were creaking.

The women standing in the streets here were not the type to work in a brothel but the type to go outside in nothing but their underwear and a jacket.

Under the effects of Tonic, people would crave the powerful pleasure chemicals secreted during sex. Some sold their bodies as a kind of excuse to engage in carnal activities.

This was a place where ordinary citizens of the outside would turn into Beastpeople and go as wild as they pleased.

"Do you come here often?" asked Kei.

"Don't say that with such a gentle look…," said Getsu. "We never come here on our own time, though we sometimes do for work."

"This area is typically plagued with problems, after all," said Reiji. "We dispose of everything from bodies to empty cans."

Kamimachi Street—this was a hangout for unlicensed prostitutes, women who sold their bodies privately.

The hideout the gangsters had told them about was nearby, just one street away.

There was the strangely meaty aroma in the air of heat pheromones mingling with aphrodisiacs. The road was scattered with used condoms and cigarette butts in the spots where you could shelter from the wind or rain.

"Don't look around too much," said Getsu. "There are tons of perverts who are into innocent young girls."

"You mean targeting newbies? Just like in a video game."

"I feel like it's more like wild animals if anything," said Reiji.

Just like a crocodile would attack newly born sea turtles moving across the beach as they tried to return to sea…

…the perverts' eyes were always glittering, seeking naive and tempting women.

Piles of garbage and crushed condoms lay everywhere. The three of them took care not to step on something awful as they walked.

They felt rude gazes gathering on them. Though Getsu looked like a normal Beastman, the human-looking Reiji and Kei seemed like they were very new to town as they looked around.

"H-hey, you. Are you new?! First time?! How about ten thousand?!" An excited customer got ahead of himself and called out to Kei in a lusty voice.

But Getsu cut in and instantly turned him away. "Sorry, Mister. We're not here for that. And anyway, that's cheap as hell!"

"Tsk, already reserved, huh… Then go to a hotel. Getting my goddamn hopes up!"

Driven off, the man grumbled as he backed off. Kei, stunned and failing to grasp the situation, finally noticed the looks that were on her. "…I'm feeling some reputational risk. Two men and one woman walking around here… Um, I feel like people are assuming we're into some *interesting* stuff."

"That's what this area is for," said Reiji.

"…And hey, Bevvy, you're surprisingly unshy about this stuff," said Getsu.

"You learn to put up with poor jokes and sexual humor when your customer base is old men… I'm used to it, but it's unpleasant."

Rather than *unpleasant*, it had to be *scary*.

Even with some rabbit traits, Kei's expression was pretty, but Reiji sensed a little discomfort in it.

Kei Kakiba had unique abilities, and she could think coolly and logically, however—

She's not good at dealing with chaotic people or…unpredictable types.

In the world of competition, it was often said that "amateurs are scary." People who weren't aware of the standard way of doing things that the experts had internalized would often act unpredictably, making them difficult to anticipate and hard to understand.

Kei was probably like that, too. Being a logical and rational person, she must have found it difficult to anticipate people who acted wildly.

Reiji tried to be considerate of her in his own clumsy way.

"We're close. This will be a rough job, so hide so you don't get hurt," he said.

"…I don't have to help?" Kei asked.

"Can you?"

"I'm prepared to… Like that thing just over there, couldn't I use it as a weapon?"

"Forget it. What do you think you're going to do with a broken car?"

"I thought I would hit someone with it, like, just smash 'em… Bad idea?" Kei was touching an abandoned car sitting at the side of the road, scrap with twisted spokes that didn't seem like it would run.

With a Beastman's strength, of course, one could pick it up and swing it around, but…

"This isn't a video game… Forget it. It'd be easier for us if you hid."

"Really?"

Ignoring Kei as she dropped the scrap metal with a mildly disappointed expression, the more experienced boys looked toward a certain building.

It was a run-down place, a ruin that had been abandoned even before the establishment of the Masquerade.

Every window in all of its ten stories was broken. The sign on the outside was dinged up from someone throwing rocks at it, and they could just barely make out the word DENTIST on it.

The entrance was glass, a formerly automatic door. Now it was smashed, and you could waltz right through.

The area seemed deserted, perhaps since they were a fair distance from Kamimachi Street. However…

"Hey, Reiji. This ain't good," said Getsu.

"What's wrong?" Reiji asked.

A gust of wind swept by them.

Every time the warm wind blew through the windowless building, Getsu sniffed. He was catching scents in the air beneath the light of the almost full moon, the fur on his neck standing in alarm.

"I'm picking up blood…and the stench is strong as hell. Fresh. It's not from someone cutting their finger or getting a nosebleed… It's as strong as the smell that comes out of a ramen shop making *tonkotsu* broth."

"That's vague. How many? Do you know where?"

"Not just one or two. It smells like…at least four or five people's blood all mixed together. The source is somewhere in this building. Not all over, but probably together in a single place."

It was no lie or joke. He spoke with such certainty that they had to take him seriously.

"Amazing. Is that one of your powers as a Mythic Beast?" Kei asked, looking up at the growling werewolf.

"When it comes to abilities, any canine hanging around here should be able to do this," he said.

They say a canine nose is tens of thousands of times stronger than that of a human.

But it was difficult for a human transformed into a Beastman to wield that canine sense of smell to the fullest. Because…

"It's hard to verbalize smells. People who are into wine, sommeliers or whatever, they make weird comparisons for alcohol smells, right? Like calling it wet dog or asphalt after the rain."

"That sounds poetic. But I kind of understand."

"Yeah. It's like that, and you can't really communicate it. You've actually got to train it."

You could smell with extreme precision and sense things. But whether you could communicate the meaning of those scents to someone else was another matter entirely, and picking out an individual's body odor to track required skill.

"I've gotten that kind of training on orders from head office, which is why I'm certain about this. People have definitely died in there. You should wait here. I won't think bad of you for it," Getsu advised Kei.

"Do you know the standard trope in horror movies?" she asked,

suddenly changing the subject.

"Huh?!" Getsu's eyes widened.

"Rule number one is, *Don't split up*. In all times and places, women who leave their allies for some reason get killed and then molested or molested and then killed."

"That's awful…"

"Exactly. So I'm going to make a different choice… I'm going to follow you," she said jokingly. But she seemed serious. Her ears were sticking straight up as she glared at Getsu.

He looked to his partner for help. "Hey, what do we do, Reiji? It's basically a hundred percent chance things'll get bad, right?"

"That's true, but Kei isn't wrong, either." With a seemingly cool look, Reiji calmly considered Kei's proposal. "Bluntly, this area isn't safe. People will casually rob, murder, rape, and commit violent acts since there's no one to complain to. If we abandon Beveren in a place like this, the options she presented will become a reality."

"For real? Then you mean we're taking her?!"

"This situation is very different from what we anticipated. It's better than leaving her on her own."

Even if the gang were armed, just attacking their hideout wouldn't be that hard.

If Reiji and Getsu got them by surprise, the duo could wipe the thugs out in an instant. But someone had already caused trouble, and people had died—so they couldn't take their eyes off who they had to protect and expose her to danger.

"Let's go."

"Hmm…"

Ending the discussion, the three of them nodded.

Back hunched, Getsu sniffed at scents near the ground as he took the lead.

Reiji followed, spewing mist like tobacco smoke, silently spreading it out to watch around them and monitor the situation from both front and back. He became very thinned out, just microscopic droplets that had no sense of sight or hearing.

There's a distance limit to me picking up sounds, like a string telephone.

Of course faint sounds were hard to pick up—that was because the vibrations were weak.

They would dampen before reaching Reiji's ears, so he wouldn't be able to hear them accurately.

If he were to turn parts of his body—like his eyes and ears—turn them into mist, and send them in, that would be different, but there was no need to do that right now.

I can identify…the general shape and temperature of whatever my mist touches.

The mist quietly flowed along like shapeless fingers, going through a crude sleeping area surrounded by blue tarps.

There were no lights.

But from the streetlights and moonlight faintly shining in from the broken windows, the neglected interior stood out. Like the smoke from dry ice, white mist flowed along the whole floor, investigating.

"…!"

"What's up? You find something?" asked Kei.

"…Yeah, it's bad. Seriously. Dammit! Those idiots. What the hell are they thinking…?!"

What the edges of his mist had touched—that warm and disgusting thing was actually—

"It's a portable toilet…just a plastic bag over a trash can. This sucks. I touched it. I need a bath. I *really* need a bath. Okay, so I didn't touch it directly, and it's not like I have any substance to wash, but emotionally speaking…!"

Coming into contact with the toilet with his mist was so disgusting that a look of repulsion crossed Reiji's face.

"…Couldn't you just have avoided it?" asked Kei.

"In this situation my mist only has the sensation of touch. I can't tell what something is until I try touching it…"

He had to probe its shape minutely, or he wouldn't know what it was.

His mist droplets checked thoroughly over the other objects scattered on the floor: snack wrappers, garbage packed with convenience store lunch boxes, and a sloppy pile of cushions that had to be a makeshift bed.

“Seems like they were using this as a living space. Pretty miserable.”

“The smell of blood is above us,” said Getsu. “If we don’t find some stairs and use those, then we might hafta climb the outside walls.” He brought up the option quite nonchalantly.

In this town of Beastpeople, some minor inconveniences could be resolved with strength.

But doing so was a hassle, and the people who had been using this place would also be civilized enough to want to avoid that.

“First floor scan complete. Nothing unusual in particular. The stairs…are around that corner,” said Reiji.

“Roger,” Getsu replied.

“How convenient,” said Kei. “With you, we don’t need a map.”

Reiji’s body made hissing sounds as it turned to haze. His mist buried into the floor, grasping the layout of the first level of the ruined building just about completely. It appeared the gang had practically abandoned the first floor and was only using the entrance area.

They approached the stairs. It looked comparatively tidier, perhaps since it saw more use.

As the dim glow of the streetlights shone in through the windows, they started to climb, keeping their guards up.

“…!”

“Egh?!”

“What the heck? Huh?!”

There was a puddle of blood.

Right in the middle of the stairs they were climbing.

It wasn’t even half an inch deep. In the middle of the shallow puddle lay a Japanese doll, decorated with a flower pattern.

To be more precise, the figure was adorned with an expensive kimono stained with blood. A tangled mess of hair in the traditional style sprouted from its head, and its porcelain cheek was covered with bits of dried blood.

The whole thing was about the size of a large plastic bottle.

It was something one would never see around these parts.

"…Yikes…!" Getsu cried. "That gives me the creeps! Is this a horror movie or what?!"

"If they had it properly displayed, that would be one thing, but in a situation like this, it's seriously scary…," said Reiji.

A Japanese doll in a puddle of blood—its realistic molding made it look like the pitiful corpse of a young child who had been beaten to death.

"What was this left here for? It's clearly not cheap," said Kei.

"It's too unique just to be garbage. I feel like there must be some purpose to this," said Reiji.

It was covered in blood, but the doll itself was undamaged. It didn't make sense why it was there.

Making hissing noises, Reiji climbed the stairs backward. The law that says mist goes from low to high places didn't apply to Mythic Beasts. He sent out his mist and touched the pool of blood. "It's real blood…not dry yet. It seems not much time has passed."

"The smell's coming from up above. Is this like, you know, the sort of thing a serial killer does?" Stopping halfway along the steps, Getsu scratched his furry cheek as he traced his memories. "Like a signature? Something that says, 'I did this.'"

"Deliberately choosing a Japanese doll is some crazy taste. It's straight out of a B movie," Reiji said. The mist hissed as it crawled along the ground, hovering over the pool of blood to touch the doll. His shapeless fingers detected a rather smooth sensation, and the blood was warm like human skin. "This is all so disgusting… It's unpleasantly lukewarm."

"Perhaps you should pick it up. I think it could be evidence," said Kei.

"We shouldn't touch it or move it. Otherwise, we won't be able to retrieve fingerprints or other biological evidence from it."

"And I just don't wanna touch it anyway," said Getsu. "Let's leave it for now and get the office forensics team to deal with it."

“Yes, let’s.”

Prioritizing preserving the scene, they avoided stepping in the pool of blood as they crossed the landing.

The stairs were sticky with blood like a waterfall. The trail of red continued up to the second, third, and fourth floors, wetting the concrete like the trail of a slug.

“Did something come up from where that doll was…?” Reiji wondered.

On the landing was a broken window.

It wouldn’t have been hard for a Beastperson on the second floor to get in, considering their physical capabilities.

Reiji climbed the steps with those thoughts in mind. When they were halfway up the building—on the fifth floor—the trail of blood changed course from the stairwell through the entrance to the second floor, cut off by the closed steel door of the emergency exit.

“I’m opening it up,” Getsu, in the lead, confirmed before turning the knob.

“All right,” Reiji agreed.

There was no lock, and the rusty hinges creaked like screams as it moved. Beyond the open door…

“““……!”””

…was a dentist’s office waiting room. Based on the old and rotten sofa, the ancient periodicals in the magazine rack, and the dusty reception desk, the place must have been abandoned for quite a while.

“…Huh?”

A single attaché case had been left there. Its lid was twisted open, and a crowbar that had presumably been used to wrench the lid loose sat beside it.

Changes of clothes and booze bottles lay here and there, and the glassless windows had a rope strung out of it leading to the boundary of the Masquerade, allowing one to shimmy over the barricades and to the outside.

"What the heck? It's empty," said Getsu.

"I heard from Neru," said Reiji. "The Black Tower Casino was attacked, and a hundred million vanished."

"What? So that could mean this case was…"

"Quite possibly. The case may have contained the stolen cash."

To sum it up, this place…

"A base for getting over the boundary…crossing the border."

It was like a circus tightrope walk, but it wouldn't be hard for a Beastperson to maneuver across. By stringing a rope up from the fifth-floor window over the barricade, one could climb up and down it to go in and out of the Masquerade.

There were bloodstains on the ground, and something like a wet mop at the back of the room, leaving a single clear line on the ground that connected the reception area to the place where the clinic rooms and fire escape were.

"…This is strange," said Kei.

"Of course it's strange. The place is covered in blood," said Getsu.

"No, something feels off… I can't say what specifically, though."

It was like a spot-the-difference puzzle. Something was clearly wrong, but they couldn't point out what.

Kei frowned with unease. Ignoring her, Reiji sent his mist crawling deep into the room, going over to reception and into the clinic rooms.

"…Beveren, stay back."

"Huh?"

"Stop right there. This isn't something amateurs should look at."

Getsu must have figured out what Reiji meant. He stepped in front of Kei to keep her back.

The boys made a wall to block her view, peering further inside. The room was almost completely dark, with barely any light from the streetlights, but it was clear that *something* was inside.

"…Ugh…!"

"Don't puke," said Reiji. "It'll waste the precious calories."

"That's what you're worried about? And like, this is…pretty fucked up." The acute stench was nauseating, and it just about made him bring up the meal that he'd stuffed himself with earlier.

It was the cruel and barbarous scene—of a dissection.

"…!"

"Don't look… You don't have to see it."

When Kei tried to peek, mist wafted over her vision as a blindfold.

But she saw it for a moment anyway, her blood running cold beneath her white rabbit fur.

"Black…spider webs?"

"No. That's not thread. It's hair."

The desolate clinic room lay in ruins, filled with broken dental chairs and discarded equipment.

Amid this scene of decay were four corpses. A spider's nest of black threads attached to the ceiling and floor were wrapped around the pieces of flesh, squeezing them like ham.

Arms, legs, torsos…shredded lumps of flesh. The pieces were just barely large enough to be identifiable, dangling above a pool of blood.

Because the victims were in Beastperson form, they resembled slaughtered animals at a glance, but some of the remains—the shapes of the fingers and eyes—called to mind human beings. The moment they noticed, they were hit with a wave of disgust.

The arrangement had clearly been deliberate. Someone had carved up the bodies with intentional malice and hung them up like decorations, as though they were proud of it. It was so repulsive that it drove those who saw it to despair.

"It's still fresh. It's been less than an hour since this happened," said Reiji.

"Ick…for real…?" Getsu groaned.

The puddle of blood on the floor hadn't dried, so it was slightly sticky.

Reiji couldn't estimate the time of death down to the minute, but he could imagine it.

"Will cleaning this up be our job…? This is so nasty…!" Getsu said.

"Most likely, yes… Though it's possible the head office will dispose

of this directly."

When Beastperson deaths occurred in town, the company they worked for, Fantastic Sweeper, handled just about all of it.

But there were exceptions when BT head office's disposal team would be dispatched.

"If people from the head office need to be involved, they'll show up. Otherwise, it'll be us."

"…That's a rough job. Are you paid well?" asked Kei.

"Sorry, but we make less than minimum wage since we have no human rights," said Reiji.

"That's horrible."

"It really is," Reiji answered.

They were made to do everything: policing, security, garbage disposal, and special cleaning services. But…

"We have nowhere to go."

…there was nowhere else for them to go, no one else for them to turn to.

Lacking the freedom to change jobs, they had no choice but to do whatever was demanded of them.

"…For now, let's do a quick check inside here," said Getsu.

"Yeah," said Reiji. "You two stay back. I'll investigate so that we don't disturb the scene." His mist sank into every corner of the crime scene, searching for evidence without entering the area. "There are lockers. They must have brought them from somewhere else…"

"…Oh yeah, I do smell oil and gunpowder. Bet there are weapons in those lockers."

"A handgun and bullets. The same type of firearm as the ones on the guys we caught."

Getsu sniffed the air, and then when Reiji probed inside one of the lockers with his mist, he immediately found the weapon in question.

The package looked like a foreign product. It must not have been well preserved since there was rust all over the handgun and bullets.

There were five more guns—the same model as the ones the gangster at the host club had carried.

They must not have planned to use them right away. They were coated in rust-prevention grease and wrapped in cloth.

"Eight lockers," said Getsu. "There are five lockers with guns still in them…"

"The lockers without guns would account for the ones carried by the three guys who barged into the host club," Reiji replied.

"Yeah. Let's search the rest of the area."

The mist seeped toward the rusted lockers placed by the wall, going into the slightest cracks to search every corner inside.

"Human clothes from the outside. And phones and wallets… They're in all eight lockers."

Farther in was a changing room.

To enter the Masquerade legitimately, one would head to Natsukibara Station by using the public transit system. From there, they'd borrow a locker and get changed, deposit their clothes, phone, and such, and then take Monster Tonic to hide their identity and enter.

The gang's base was situated at an illegal back entrance. They would take a Monster Tonic to turn into a Beastperson, go along the rope strung out the window to cross the boundary, get changed here, and then leave their phone—so Reiji surmised.

Getsu responded with a nod. "There are four bodies. When you add the guys we beat up and captured, that makes seven."

"There's one extra change of clothes. Could that mean…?"

When they'd interrogated the gangsters they'd caught, the men had admitted they had four other buddies.

They had caught three at the club to a total of seven. The numbers matched, so then who was the one extra?

"They probably belonged to the rag wringer, Yasuo Arimoto."

"I can't even say I'm glad we found what we were after…," Getsu said, wearing a conflicted expression.

Behind him, hopping to try and get a look, Kei said, "I can't really see, but it seems you found some clues. Shouldn't we be glad?"

"The cleanup is gonna be a pain," Getsu added.

"You've got that right. If these were just Beastman corpses, we could bring over a trash bag and pack them up…"

Inside the lockers were items that connected the gangsters to the outside, including all their phones and changes of clothing.

Without those, there was nothing to be done. But since they had found them, they couldn't ignore them, which meant…

"We're gonna be investigating those dismembered corpses piece by piece and figuring out their identities later," said Getsu. "We've done stuff like that before, but corpse puzzles are pretty rough."

"That's not all. The arrangement of the bodies is too abnormal to ignore," Reiji pointed out.

The hairs tangled together like a spider's nest—this matched up with the other incident he'd heard about from Neru at the host club.

Fibers had been discovered on the bodies of those who'd been attacked at the illegal high-rise casino.

They'd be investigating them now—and if they matched the mysterious hairs that had been left here, then that meant…

"It has to be the same culprit. A normal human or Beastperson wouldn't be able to produce hairs like these and kill with them. It's highly likely the killer took Phantasm Tonic."

Mythic Tonic had brought back monsters of myth and legend that had gone extinct in ancient times, using the hair or fur saved in museums and historical remains.

The urban legends repeated by people and folklore of modern times, which had taken root in people's shared consciousness, gave rise to mysticality, generating Phantasms, which were captured for their extract.

Phantasm Tonic could change mere human beings into creatures of urban legend. The parent organization of Fantastic Sweeper, which Reiji and Getsu worked for—BT head office—had developed it in absolute secrecy, only for the product to be stolen and leaked.

"It could be Mythic Tonic," Getsu said. "What d'you think about that?"

"Let's ask the boss. The old man is something like a monster pro," Reiji replied.

"…That's the sort of title a little kid would have," Kei commented.

“There were kids at the orphanage who went by the same sort of titles. There was a computer pro and a trivia pro, for instance.”

“It’s pretty similar. The problem is that the boss is actually useful sometimes, so you can’t ignore him.”

Even as they bantered, they were reeling from the aberrant crime scene.

Of course Kei felt uncomfortable, but even Reiji and Getsu did, too, despite being used to these things.

“This scene is pretty gruesome,” said Reiji.

“Of course it is. It’s gory.”

“I don’t mean in that sense. The killer didn’t just desecrate the bodies but deliberately strangled them with human hair and hung them from the ceiling. It really feels like they’re trying to draw attention to themselves.”

“…I’m not following.” One could easily imagine a question mark floating over Getsu’s head.

Reiji pointed to the dangling body. “If the person behind this were just going to kill the gangsters, then they would have stopped after the strangling. Deliberately hanging the corpses to make them stand out makes it feel contrived. It’s like the bodies are a trophy, something to strike fear in the people who see them. And the killer is all too happy to make them afraid.”

The childishly brutal scene was practically screaming, “So? Amazing, right? Aren’t you scared? Tee-hee-hee.”

“The killer isn’t hiding it but showing off their work. It’s juvenile… That’s the impression the scene gives me.”

“…I don’t understand. How do you make that kind of judgment?” Kei was pallid.

“It’s a hunch. When you look at a painting or read a book, you get a sense of the creator’s intent… They’re communicating things, like they want you to feel this or they want to show off that, right?” Reiji said, looking over the scene without directly touching it. “It’s also possible that I’m wrong. But this sort of first impression is accurate more often than you’d think. It might be a bit useful to the investigation moving forward, though we can’t assume anything.”

It was an amateur’s call, and it couldn’t even be called profiling.

But this wasn't Reiji's first time seeing this sort of thing.

Scenes of cruelty caused by Beastpeople, not involving Phantasms or Mythic Beasts.

"You've seen…lots of things like this?" Kei asked.

"It's part of the job," he replied.

The two of them were the only working unit in this lawless town. This was way harder than working a solo shift at a restaurant.

"Just like we did with the hit-and-run centaur, we clean up a lot of bodies. We've gotten used to it," Reiji added.

"And we get paid less than minimum wage for it. It seriously sucks," Getsu grumbled. Fed up and sighing, he looked around the scene. "Let's call for help. We can't do the job unless they bring a body bag, protective gear, and a cleaner for us."

"Yeah. From what Neru said, there should be a phone around somewhere…" Once again, Reiji searched the crime scene with his mist.

As he was searching for a phone, Kei Kakiba, who had been blocked from viewing the gory spectacle, suddenly realized something. "That reminds me… This."

There was that bloodstain that went from the landing on the second floor along the stairs through the gangsters' hideout to the scene of the slaughter.

She had sensed something was off there, and now she had a clear idea of what was wrong. "I thought it was strange. This blood track doesn't make sense."

"Huh?" Hearing her speak so suddenly, Getsu turned around with a blank look.

As if sorting out the doubts that had risen in her mind, Kei said, "I'm talking about all the blood that was on the landing of the second story. The blood trail continued up the stairs."

"That's what it looked like to us, yeah. That someone carrying something covered in blood came up the stairs.

"But the blood came all this way without ever stopping. There was also no sign that it veered to the side. So logically …"

They should have come across the source of the blood somewhere.

It was a one-way passage that went in a straight line. The mist search would miss nothing—there was nowhere to hide on the way—and there was also no sign they had left out a window.

"If you think about it normally, then they'd have left…," said Getsu.

"Left where?" Kei pointed out. "I think there should be *two* blood trails, making a round trip."

"Now that you mention it, maybe you're right… Wait, so then… What does that mean?"

It was strange and contradictory. Doubts swirled about in Kei's head, and she crouched down and observed the blood trail on the floor.

There was a bloody mark on the ground like someone had wiped the floor with a wet mop. If you looked at it closely, then it was going one way—from the puddle of blood in the hideout where the bodies lay, through reception, and out to the fire escape.

"…They didn't come in. So did this bloodstain…go out instead?!" she said.

What did that mean?

The trio hadn't been moving forward from the stair landing to the location of the tragedy but going backward.

They should have encountered the killer at some point. But they hadn't. How could they explain this contradiction?

"I think we might have crossed paths…with the killer," she said.

"Huh?! But we never ran into any kind of monster-like person…," said Getsu.

"I don't think there was a person. But…"

There was a *doll*.

The moment she came to that conclusion, all the hairs on their bodies stood on end.

Kei's rabbit ears rose up straight. Then she whipped around and locked eyes with *the doll*.

It was on top of the counter of the ruined reception desk, about

the same size as the booze bottles the gangsters had left lying around.

The city lights shone down on it through the window, revealing bloodstained clothes and a face covered in blood.

"…*Keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh!!!*"

Like a ventriloquist's puppet, the Japanese doll that had been lying in a puddle of blood on that landing…

…opened its mouth and gave a rattling laugh, its eyes going wide.

Tongue hanging out, eyeballs glaring, spittle scattering—tightly packed inside a fully artificial shell was the flesh of a miniature human. It was a doll person wearing an artificial shell.

"…?!"

Kei couldn't say a word. Her voice was caught in her throat.

The sight was so shocking—so difficult to understand—that her mind had gone blank.

A brief moment. A golden light from the doll's kimono. It produced a medical scalpel from its clothes and twirled it like a traditional Japanese beauty wielding a *naginata*, cackling as it went straight for her.

Oh no! I won't make it in time! I'm gonna get sliced up!

The doll person leaped off the counter.

The blade plunged toward Kei to skewer her eyeballs.

"Not happening!"

"Keh?!"

The moment it turned around, Getsu's safety boot flew in an arc, steel toe connecting with the mysterious doll.

*

“Gahhhh! That freaked the hell outta me! The hell was that? So creepy!”

“It’s amazing that you would kick it without hesitation,” said Kei. “I really didn’t want to… It felt like I’d be cursed. Thanks.”

“No prob! I appreciate the gratitude! Though I don’t wanna get cursed, either!!!”

Getsu’s snap judgment had kept Kei Kakiba alive.

The moment had lasted less than a second. She’d turned around, and there it was—the little human that looked like a Japanese doll.

Her mind had shut down at the impossible sight, and she’d been unable to decide what to do next.

But the boy at her side—Getsu Raisan—had been different.

Seeing the exact same thing, he had reacted in less than a second, saving her right before her eye would have been gouged out.

“Where’d that little bastard go?!” he cried.

“I—I don’t know! Um, you kicked it, and it was so small and light that it flew away!”

After getting intercepted by that kick, the doll person had been knocked somewhere. Then right before hitting the wall—

“It spun around and turned upside-down and landed on the wall. And then it scurried up to the ceiling…,” she said.

“That doesn’t make sense! What the heck? Is it a bug?! It’s like a bug?!”

“Don’t ask me… Kasumi, this is a freak. We’ve got a freak on our hands! You’re in charge of those, right?!”

“Don’t put me in charge of this nonsense…! Tsk.” Reiji had been searching for a phone but tossed away what he had found.

It was an analog phone with the line cut, no longer useful. There was no way for them to call for help now. “Looks like the only way for us to survive is to finish that thing off. Let’s do this, Getsu.”

“Roger. But between the darkness and that thing’s size and speed, how are we gonna pull that off?”

Skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter, skitter.

It made sounds like a bug. The doll’s limbs were rubbing against the walls and floor as it scampered around.

Kei's rabbit ears twitched, and she tilted her head right, left, up, glancing in every direction. "…There are sounds coming from all over. It's worked up."

"What about smells, canine?" Reiji asked his partner.

"You're asking too much… This whole place is covered in blood. It all smells the same."

They were right by the scene of a slaughter. An iron stench wafted strongly from the puddle of blood. The doll person was also covered in blood, completely concealing its presence. It had ways of interfering with everything: sight, hearing, and smell.

It was a calculated scene of slaughter. The doll had set this trap to hunt Beastpeople.

"Don't underestimate us, you toy." There was a gentle *fsss* as white mist spewed out from Reiji's mask. "If we can't see it, hear it, or smell it, then I'll fill this place up."

White fog swirled around where the three of them stood. Making complicated hand signs, Reiji called out the name of his technique.

"Monochrome Mist Style: Black Womb."

"…It's like a tornado." The unexpected beauty of the maneuver left Kei Kakiba astonished. Mist wrapped around the three of them, spinning around as it turned black. It mixed with the slight amount of remaining white fog and sparkled like the pictures of Jupiter she'd seen.

"Reiji, what the heck is this?" Getsu asked.

"Don't touch it. If you touch, you'll get cut."

Crack, snap, creak, creak, snap, snap, crack…!

Hard sounds rang out. When the trash and insects wafting outside of the tornado touched it, the mist instantly hardened.

"The moment something touches the twister, my droplets instantly become hardened blades. That means everything around us is basically a blender. I'll pulverize the whole room."

The tornado blender of tiny, finely crushed razor blades slowly grew bigger, and the moment it touched the walls and ceiling, an earsplitting sound rang out as it ground against the concrete.

"I'm sure that thing is proud of its speed…but just try to dodge this. If you can," said Reiji.

"Kyeeek?!"

There was a sound like a monkey. Something touched the swirl of blades, and it sparkled like black fireworks.

Blade fragments sparkled as they scattered, and they could see fine drops and clots of blood mingling with the swirling airflow.

"Did you get it?!" Kei cried.

"No, I just scraped it. The thing's cautious… I touched it slightly, and it backed off."

"Wait, hold on. It couldn't have gotten away!"

"This is just a matter of time. If I continue to spread the whirlpool, I can pulverize it."

"That's not what I'm talking about! If it can't get through this whirlpool…then won't it run somewhere else? That's what I would do," she pointed out.

Her comment was so unexpected that Reiji stopped flat. "…"

"When we're inside this cyclone, we can't see what's going on outside. We don't even know if it's gone, do we?"

As Kei had said, they couldn't see anything outside of the fifteen-foot vortex in the corner of the reception room where they stood.

So if this mystery Phantasm chose just to flee, they would have no way of sensing it.

"Plus, if you make the vortex too big, I think it'll turn the scene of the crime into mixed fruit juice. You said that there was work to do, like investigating those who had been killed. Is keeping this up a good idea?"

"…You have a point. It'd be wrong to let that thing go."

After hearing and seeing the doll, Reiji Kasumi's gut reaction had been, *That thing kills people.*

Even if it were a bad person, if they were human, it had to be killing and hurting people for a purpose—for a goal. It was very unlikely for someone to do something as crazy as this without reason. Most couldn't do that.

But very rarely, they'd get someone who was just that uninhibited.

This was a type of creature that enjoyed killing, a kind of monster serial killer whose very existence was problematic. Either the

Phantasm Tonic had exposed their hidden inclinations, or they had just become high and gone crazy.

"If we let it run free, it'll kill more people. That would be bad. But…"

If Reiji let down the vortex—

—the first to be targeted would be the weakest among them.

"Do you understand? You're in the most danger, Kei. You'd die much more easily than us."

The doll person was abnormally fast.

It would be a close race between it and Getsu. But the difference in size would prove itself a challenge.

It was just so small. The larger would be stronger, and the smaller would be faster. If it exercised sharper reflexes than a werewolf or used some secret move it had yet to show off, the doll could very well turn the tables on them—Phantasms defied common sense, after all.

They couldn't afford to make a mistake. And therefore—

"Failure means your death," said Reiji. "Are you trying to get killed?"

"But still! If you let that thing get away and it kills someone, just like with what happened to the owner…!"

Someone, somewhere.

"Losing someone you care about makes you cry, right? That's the last thing I want. Even if we end up safe and sound, if the doll kills someone else, I would have a bad taste in my mouth for the rest of my life. So stop your tornado!" Kei implored him without hesitation.

"…Dammit…!"

Her eyes met Reiji's cynical gaze. He hated how she valued the lives of others more than her own. That would never sit well with him—it was terrible, appalling.

That's just like—

Like the family he'd lost.

She was just like his dead sister, whose kindness he'd taken advantage of to survive.

"You piss me off!!!"

"You piss *me* off!!! I'll be okay, so stop this!"

"No, you won't! Just sit down and let me protect you! I'm not gonna let someone as gorgeous and talented as you die!"

"What?! You're the hottie here! And I know you'll save me!"

"Don't you give me that…!"

The two of them glared at one another. Caught between them, Getsu repeatedly looked back and forth and said, "This isn't the time to be arguing! What's with this fight?! Are you two serious right now?!"

""Yes, it's a serious fight!"" they both cried out in sync.

"Looks like flirting to me! Worst case, I'll protect you, so just take it down, Reijiiiii!" Getsu yelled back at them.

With even his partner telling him to take it down, Reiji clenched his teeth hard and said, "Fine, I'll take it down. Keep her safe!!!"

"Okay, partner!!!"

Reiji's arm cut sideways through the air, and the swirl of blades vanished.

The floor and ceiling had been gouged out in a donut shape, but the interior of the room wasn't that bad. There was plenty of room for a doll-size Phantasm to hide among the scattered rubble, inside the cracks in the walls, or on the ceiling.

"It's here…!"

Reiji could tell it hadn't fled. He couldn't hear the sound, and he couldn't sense its presence. But he could feel its gaze. His intuition was causing a tingling at the back of his neck, an unidentified warning that told him of hostile intent.

With how small it is, a surprise attack is its only option. But where's it going to come from?

The rubble at their feet? The cracks in the ceiling? The gaps of the broken walls?

The Phantasm could be lurking anywhere. Just then, something caught his eye, ratcheting up his anxiety.

"What is it? It's different from before…?!"

The shadow moved. No—that was no shadow.

Damaged black matte threads. Countless fibers.

Human hairs hidden by shadow. The moment Reiji spotted them, they jumped like snakes.

Hundred and thousands and millions, so many he couldn't begin to count them.

Hair of unbelievable length undulated, slipping past the boys' feet to target Kei.

In an instant, the fiber had wrapped around her shoes. They were a gathering of great fangless snakes, living ropes that would crush your flesh and shatter bones if they wrapped around you, just like they had so cruelly done to the gangsters.

"Ah…"

Right before the mass of hair could capture Kei Kakiba, the high school rabbit girl…

"Geh…! Uuuugh, hngh…!!!"

…Reiji cut in to defend her. The hair tangled around him instead. In the blink of an eye, it went from his angles to his knees, from his knees to his waist.

The bundles of hair coiled around him and shot upward, strangling his muscles and bones with incredible force.

"Huh?! Kasumi, are you okay?!"

"Nnnnnngh!!!"

It hurt so badly that he couldn't even get an answer out.

By nature, Reiji Kasumi was mist given life. He became human by taking Human Tonic, but his essence was formless vapor, and any guns or blades would pass between the droplets of his body in vain.

Yet, impossibly, the black hair was constricting even his formless mist.

Crack, crack, snap, snap, crack, creak, crack…!

His bones creaked, his muscles were crushed, and blood gushed out. His body bent in the wrong direction, and his bones shattered. The unfathomable pain was proof that the Phantasm had captured his essence.

Just like the one I fought before…the rag wringer. So Phantasms do *have the power to kill me…!*

Neither Mythic Beasts nor Phantasms were superior. Though they were different in terms of age, both were creatures of mysticality. So it would be possible for Reiji the Brocken to kill this mysterious doll person.

The thick, squirming bundles of hair tightened from his feet to his waist, from his shoulders all the way to his neck, trying to suffocate him quickly. The roots of the black hair were coming from a little shadow in the cracks of the floor, hidden in the wreckage.

Its porcelain skin shone a pretty white in the pale light, maintaining a hard and inorganic texture as its lips twisted upward like some CG creature.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee…!"

A gleeful laugh. The Japanese doll Phantasm grabbed its own hair in both hands like a fisherman pulling a dragnet, yanking it with abnormal strength to almost crush Reiji's entire body.

The millions of strands of unfathomable hair shot violently from the Phantasm's doll head, undulating as they swallowed him up and moved on to their next victim.

But that was the wrong move.

"Gets—!!!"

"All right, leave it to me!"

If the doll person had made any single miscalculation…

…it was that it had only seen the mist human Reiji, with his peculiar powers, as a threat and had judged his partner, the werewolf Getsu Raisan, to be just a common canine Beastman, and had not hit him with that first attack.

"Ohhh…ohhhhhh…!"

The moon shone directly above them. It was slightly less than full, but the silver disc still glowed beautifully.

The rays of the moon awakened his ancient werewolf blood. His muscles visibly thickened, and he instantly grew a couple of inches taller, the pale glow of his pelt taking on an even more beautiful shine.

He grabbed the writhing hair in his hands. The hair tangled around him, every single strand surging in resistance, but that was nothing to him. The original werewolf yanked it with incredible force.

"Kyeee…keeeeeeeeeee?!" the doll person cried out. Its voice was shrill like that of a mouse, but you could tell that it was scared, frightened.

"Ahhhhhyaaaaaaaaghhh!!!"

It was just like fishing with a pole.

Getsu grabbed hold of the rope composed of tangled hair.

The doll person resisted, thrusting its hairs into the floor like literal roots, but the werewolf just pulled with his muscles, which were now double or triple their previous size. He yanked the hair taut to the limit, but not a single fiber broke.

"Whoa, this stuff is really strong. Stubborn little shit. But…!"

Creak, creak, strain, strain. Werewolf, hair, doll person, hair—the limit of tensile strength. *Creak, strain…!*

A spider's web of cracks spread underfoot.

The floor bulged up with a *pop*. Latched onto the floor, the Phantasm hair resisted being pulled up, refusing to break. But there wasn't enough weight to support it. The doll person was far smaller than Getsu and very light.

So the hair drove into the concrete, supporting itself with the rebar. That would normally make it invincible, impossible to beat in a contest of strength. But the werewolf's power was at absurd levels, and he overcame the heavy concrete and rebar.

"If I can't break it…then how about swinging it around?!"

He pulled and the rebar bent as the hair dragged it out.

Spilling broken fragments, just like a great tree pulled out from the root.

He grabbed the steel with hair tangled around it and pulled it literally from the root, swung it around, and slammed it down.

"Kyeee…?!"

A destructive *boom* like that of a cannon. The force of being pulled up sent the Japanese doll flying, and it collided with the roof. The creature popped right through the plasterboard, white covering its bloodstained kimono as if it had been hit with powder.

"So this thing fights with hair, not strings, huh?"

There was a *fsss* sound as the boy tangled up in the hair disappeared rapidly, becoming mist to escape his restraints.

As the hair falling away from him writhed and snapped, Reiji once again took form. "If even you can't break it, Getsu, that means the hair is as strong as aerospace carbon wire… A characteristic of Phantasms, impossible for mere human protein. This is definitely the

same substance that was used to string up the bodies."

"You mean this hair can't be cut? Then the doll can't go to the barber."

"I assume it can adjust the length. I doubt it ever has to go to the hairstylist…but let's test it out."

The incredibly thin hairs writhed fiercely, looking like worms in sludge. As Getsu stared down at the hair in his hands in disgust, his partner Reiji Kasumi, now finally free, glared at the Phantasm that had hit the ceiling.

"Monochrome Mist Style: Black Decapitation."

Reiji's right arm cut through the air, and black mist solidified instantaneously, becoming a beheading blade to strike.

As the Phantasm was still stuck there, he thrust at it, trapping the creature between blade and ceiling to slice it in two—

"…Or not. That's harder than any matter."

"Kee-hee, kee-hee-hee-heeeeee…!"

The hair audibly creaked and strained.

Bunches of hair undulated like snakes, stopping the black blade.

As the blade struck, scattering sparks, it cracked like glass and shattered to melt into the air.

"It really couldn't cut it," said Kei. "…Kasumi, how well can that move normally cut?"

"It can slice open a whole vehicle. I've never tried it on a tank, though."

At the very least, it was harder than iron.

But that thing had surpassed the limits of organic matter, and it didn't follow the ordinary laws of physics.

It was an obvious contradiction, a breakdown in logic. It was the accumulated dissatisfaction and anxiety of over a hundred million people in this completely controlled society, their pain and grief and rage, given suitable form through urban legends, conspiracy theories, and scary stories—tales that would stir up their emotions to reach the point where they finally took shape.

A Phantasm would not die, and it could not break.

“Kee, kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee, kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…!!!”

The doll’s laughter sounded like the squeak of a mouse.

It peeled its kimono, sticky with dust and blood, out of the indent in the concrete of the ceiling.

Its face was broken. The visage of a young girl, a combination of realistic and cartoonish designs particular to Japanese dolls, had cracked from the impact of the slam, and the porcelain skin near its left eye was crumbling away.

“Huurts… It huurts…!!! But…I’m okay… Kee-hee…kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!!!”

It giggled madly.

The broken doll’s head was packed with flesh. The skin was peeled away from the muscle around the eye, just like an anatomical model in a science room, and it was wet with pink fluid as it bobbled around.

The sight was so grotesque it made Kei ill. “Urk…!”

The bloody doll’s writhing hair was like a bundle of snakes or leaping innards.

Even after colliding with the concrete and taking the slice from that guillotine-like blade, the doll was scarcely damaged.

“A human-size doll. A Japanese doll Phantasm… Does anyone know any stories involving this?” asked Reiji.

“I—I dunno! Eugh, it’s so gross…!” Getsu groaned.

“I see. This isn’t good.”

A Phantasm could only be killed in a manner based on the stories, anecdotes, or urban legends that had given rise to it.

If they didn’t know the rules, it was invincible. That couldn’t be changed, even for Mythic Beasts themselves.

“*Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech*!”

A mad doll, a shriek of delight.

“…We have no way to kill it!!!” Reiji cried out in irritation as the bloody hair attacked.

*

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring…

The sound of an analog phone—unusual to hear these days.

"Not getting through… I guess it's either broken or unplugged."

The president's office at Fantastic Sweeper in an area of Natsukibara, the Masquerade. Having only just finished the company feast, private secretary Neru operated her laptop with one hand and pressed buttons on a landline phone with the other.

Her boss, Narasaki, said leisurely, "Oh dear, that's a problem. You didn't get the wrong number, did you, Neru?"

"Nopes! Checked three times. By the way, Boss…" On the table was a magnum-size bottle of white wine. It was the house brand of an Italian family restaurant, a decent quality product but nothing fancy. But the glass Narasaki poured it into was top-quality crystal. It wasn't unusually shaped or anything, but it was high-class, with the air of an antique that has been passed down for decades, perhaps a whole century. "…you smell like booze. Does the wine taste good?"

"Mm-hmm. There's a great variety of places where grapes are grown, the method of pour, the type and shape of the glass, the way you smell it, and the way you aerate the wine—well, I could go on about such erudition, but…"

The sensitivity of the human tester was the most important element in detecting such differences.

"When you get right down to it, that's the way the world works," he said with a cold smile. "In the end, it's completely subjective. Trying to extrapolate the feelings of a single individual to other people creates hierarchies in the act of mere tasting, to make judgments about which is superior and stir up disparities."

"Too long. In a word, please."

"Delicious." Dutifully answering with one word, he carefully enjoyed his chilled white wine without changing his expression. He'd drunk quite a bit during the party, but he could still hold his liquor. "High-quality goods with legends attached are appropriately valuable, but personally speaking, I also appreciate more casual liquors. The shared recognition of the masses—that's the magic that

makes it *delicious*."

"Like how Phantasms work?"

"Ahhh, Neru, my secretary. I love how you grasp things so quickly. If you were only closer to my age, I would instantly invite you to an after-party, but unfortunately, I can't do that with a little girl."

"Drop dead, MILF-chaser."

"Ha-ha-ha, I'm too handsome to die. But anyway, getting back on track, Phantasms are born from humanity's shared cognition and are bound by its laws. The rag wringer was just the same."

"…Like how vampires are weak to the sun. Or werewolves transform when they see the moon. That sort of thing?"

"Those are the laws of Mythic Beasts, but both are, in essence, the same thing, so correct. However, in the case of old Mythic Beasts, there is no singular shared recognition. Go back in time, and you find vampires who sunbathe for their health and werewolves who transform when they see an egg yolk. The latter seems like he'd be living a high school romcom life!"

"Old men who only talk about the past are obnoxious."

"All in all, Mythic Beasts have many legends to them, so it's possible to interpret or distort their powers more broadly."

It depended on a person's effort, determination, or delusion—basically the way they thought.

"They might realize, *So this is what I am! I never knew! I see!* The fact that this works can make Mythic Beasts stronger than Phantasms. In exchange, the newcomers can be much more powerful, though."

"Are Phantasms stronger in a straight fight?"

"It does depend on compatibility. But the population density back in the age of Mythic Beasts and the age of the gods are both incomparable with that of the modern day. Phantasms were born from the shared cognition of millions, tens of millions of people, and a human who absorbs that essence will become a monster that operates on the countless fantasies poured into them. Of course they're stronger. They have the numbers."

"Pretty brutally frank logic…"

“But it’s correct, no? Numbers are violence. Not that I would ever want to take the Phantasm Tonic.”

It was true that it would make you stronger. The supernatural powers that the Phantasm Tonic manifested rivaled those of Mythic Beasts and occasionally surpassed them.

However, the price for that was the severe pollution of the spirit that was the focus of those fantasies. Your free will was distorted, and before you knew it, you were just a being that followed the laws of the Phantasm stories to cause tragedies—an incarnated Phantasm.

“Once that happens, well, you can’t say you’re alive. If the monsters in horror movies really existed, they would be threats and not entertainment. They don’t even cause drama! They’re just set dressing.”

In a horror movie, the characters who created the drama were the humans who were being attacked.

The monster generated sympathy for the drama of humans who struggled against it or those humans who were stricken helpless by it. This dynamic was designed to entertain the viewers.

“The only way to make the set dressing leave the stage is to get rid of it according to the script. With a werewolf, a silver bullet or wolfsbane is supposed to work… But if you think about it, wolfsbane would work on anyone, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, it is poison.”

“Boorish quips aside, we hold the stories, legends, and laws to counter the Phantasm that Reiji and Getsu are surely facing right now. But…”

The sound of paper sliding filled the office as he tossed copies of the electronic reports that he’d had his secretary print out onto the desk.

They were investigative reports on the body that had been discovered in the high-rise illegal casino—the task that had been forwarded to Forensics at the head office.

“The BT head office forensics team sure is fast. This much information in a few hours? Looks like a real pain to read.”

“That’s all well and good, but we have no way to give them that

info.”

Immediately after receiving the reports, they had called the phone at the gangster’s hideout, which they had tracked down.

But the only thing that had reached Narasaki’s old-fashioned receiver was the sound of the robotic ringtone. Either nobody was there, or…

“Still can’t get through,” said Neru. “Things must have already gotten rough.”

“Oh, it’ll be okay. The rules of this Phantasm—the dead doll—are easy to understand since they’re quite clichéd.”

There were many monsters, ghost stories, and *youkai* tales about dolls.

In one of them, the hair of a Japanese doll inside a glass case grows of its own volition without anyone touching it.

Once the owner notices and grows afraid, supernatural phenomena start happening. The owner’s pet dies, the case unnaturally shakes, and the doll sneaks out of the case to be found where the owner least expects it.

There were many variations to this tale, but the one thing just about all of them shared was…

“The doll’s hair grows,” said Narasaki. “Though that’s just a misunderstanding that can be completely explained by science.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, basically, the old dolls were made by planting the hair of real people onto heads of porcelain and such. They didn’t use glue and tied it on the inside to keep it attached.”

With time, the tie would loosen, making it seem as though the hair was growing. If you took care of the doll and maintained it by combing its hair, this would happen even faster. Owners who were that fastidious would also be more likely to notice this quirk in their dolls.

“Most of the knots were tied with some slack so that it wouldn’t come out too easily. When people noticed the hair had grown, they would become frightened, wondering whether it was alive, if it would curse them, if it would move…”

They wished, prayed, and feared.

The facts they had analyzed from the evidence found in the trash had revealed the Phantasm's true nature.

"We were able to extract some DNA from the fragments of fibers discovered on the burnt bodies of the Beastpeople who were tossed into that drum can. Though they burned them up, apparently, some parts were only half-cooked. Upon comparing those bits with the database, the forensics team found no matching individuals… The results were practically nonsense. Different DNA was detected in every single strand of hair. That is to say, all of the hairs have different genes, and moreover, they were from people who don't actually exist."

"…Artificial then? Like what you would use to make a cheap wig?"

"Fake hair wouldn't have DNA in the first place. It was the hair of people who purely do not exist, hair belonging to no one, and a ridiculous amount of it with no evidence of life. Dead hair with no roots."

This could only mean one thing.

"It means the hair is unreal. Basically, part of a Phantasm. And of the Phantasms that BT head office had retrieved and turned into Tonic, there is just one that's applicable."

Collection number G028141, class: green, safe—the Dead Doll.

Narasaki smiled as he casually read over the text of the confidential materials he'd acquired from BT head office.

"A Japanese doll with hair that grows is a comparatively newer urban legend from the recent past. Generally, people suddenly realize one day that the hair of a doll in their house has grown and are cursed as a result."

"Hmm… Then they die?"

"Hardly! The convention is hearing strange noises and the family becoming ill. Typically, there's no more than that. And that's paired with praying and requesting a memorial service to make it end."

It was unusual for people to die in ghost stories and urban legends about Japanese dolls with growing hair.

It made sense if you thought about it—no matter how eerie the thing was, it was just a little doll. You could easily imagine strange happenings like curses or spells, but it was hard to imagine a doll

killing you through a direct act of violence.

"According to the head office's findings, the Phantasm Tonic dead doll is classed as green… It doesn't directly harm humans. Taking the Phantasm Tonic with its essence should only cause some mild curses, you know?"

"I wouldn't want to be cursed, though. It's not an issue of degree. Besides…" The secretary Neru stated the obvious, then asked him curiously, "Isn't it strange? It's killed three people just that we know of, so it's very dangerous."

"Indeed. Well, this next part is just my hypothesis. We have to encounter the thing itself and verify to see whether that's actually the case. Best case scenario, we catch it and dissect it, but that aside…"

While making a gesture of placing a burden to the side, Narasaki answered, "Do you know about ancient curses, Neru?"

"Like when you draw a magic circle, and it's spooky scary, and then *ta-da-da-da,* a demon pops out?"

"Not exactly that, but close. It goes by various names—magic, *jujutsu*, the way of yin and yang, *Shugendou*, Vajrayana—but basically, it's the control of supernatural phenomena by manipulating the collective consciousness. It's like different programming languages, and the results produced are the same. It's just the language and culture of the approach are different."

The control of the foolish masses by a minority of wise men. If *X* was present, and you did *Y*, then *Z* occurred. Break it down, and that was all it was. There were causal factors, and the few who had monopolized the process of logic to derive results—those who held the knowledge—would hold the power.

"For example, in ancient times, the Christian teachings that swept over Europe were written in complex, non-vernacular language, and translation was not allowed. The clergy monopolized the word of God and continued to rule based on that authority."

If that was another kind of magic, one of the traditional spells that had gone on since ancient times, then…

"BT head office and this nation's government are doing the very same thing. A society where information is completely controlled,

and the Masquerade, where all connections are severed. There is occult and there is power in anonymity."

"Too long. Obnoxious. Difficult to understand." Receiver in one hand, the secretary was fed up.

But Narasaki did not stop, continuing to flap his tongue. "Occult control via monopolization of knowledge is the source of power in an ultra-controlled society. Looking at it that way reveals a different side of this string-puller and the terrorist incidents that began with the Mythic Tonic leak, not counting the hanging murder incident."

In opposition to the occult monopolization was the act of sharing.

Exposing the wisdom of the wise to the foolish was blasphemy. When people shared wisdom, it became common knowledge, stripped of the robes of authority that made the wisdom what it was, preventing such garb from ever being worn again.

"There was no discernible reason the Tonic was given to both culprits, the hit-and-run centaur and the rag wringer. The culprit actively shared a video of them to promulgate it, to display their existence. Both of these actions were attempts to counter the old magic, the occult, through the modern magic that is sharing."

"…Sharing is magic? I don't get it. You can't shoot fireballs by sharing."

"Don't think in terms of RPGs. Waving a staff and chanting spells is just one facet of magic. Going viral on the internet and making something known to fools who know nothing…"

To literally alter the world with a new concept—

"…is also magic. Do you know what it can do?"

"Who knows? I'm not that interested, either."

"I figured. But listen a little more. This part is the main thrust!"

As if to declare his desire to drop the punchline of his best joke—

Not even trying to hide the smirk on his face or his amusement, Narasaki held up his wine glass.

"Mythic Beasts are superior to Phantasms in terms of their greater history and depth. With the accumulation of stories and the changes in legends, myth, manga, anime, video games of the modern era, et cetera, their image is constantly being rewritten, making endlessly broad interpretation possible. I gave the example

before, but a vampire that is resistant to sunlight would also be possible."

Now, however, the existence of the Phantasm Tonic had been proven by the leak and unveiling of the video.

"Take this drug, and you can do amazing things! If your hair grows, you should even be able to kill with it! Since they did all that in the video, there's no reason you couldn't!"

"…A broad interpretation of Phantasms. Will that expand their abilities…?!"

"Exactly that! Oh, what interesting ideas that string-puller has. If only I knew who they were."

BT head office used three major classes to indicate the danger level of a Phantasm.

Safe, secure quickly—green.

Dangerous, secure immediately—yellow.

Destroy, secure by any means possible, no matter what must be sacrificed—dead (red).

"The dead doll is green. It just causes minor curses, not bad enough to kill people—or at least, that's how it should have been. But if whoever took that Tonic had watched that video, we can't rely on that rating at all."

If one wished for something…

Then their desire would certainly be manifested.

This was the miracle, the magic, that gave Phantasms access—via shared videos on the internet—to the special traits only Mythic Beasts were thought to possess.

"The killer Phantasm that's wandering the city tonight has become deadlier through a broader interpretation of its powers. Dear me, how dangerous! Perhaps I'll close up and go home. I'm

sleepy from drinking anyway."

"…You're not even thinking to contact your underlings? They might be battling for their lives right this minute."

"I mean, we can't get through on the phone. It'd be a pain to go look for them, so there's nothing we can do, right?"

Neru had dialed the phone line that the gang had set up at their hideout.

After learning their number, she'd called it, thinking she might be able to get in contact with the team heading in there right this moment, but the phone lines must have been cut. She couldn't get through, and there was no signal.

"But you can relax. The dead doll may have acquired some dangerous superpowers, but they're not that hard to deal with. You'll figure it out quickly if you think about it just a bit."

"You mean to strike its weakness? But what's the weakness of a doll?"

"That's not quite it. It's less about weakness than the outcome. The important thing is how the legends of Japanese dolls with hair that grows come to an end."

If a hero of legend was killed by poison, and their remains were discovered and made into Monster Tonic…

Then whoever took it would also become a hero. But…what if they were poisoned, just like in the story?

"Then he would surely die, just as it's destined to be. This is due to the accumulation of will passed down since the time of the first myths and legends. In other words, because of mysticality, it can't be avoided."

"Couldn't whoever took the Tonic just go straight to the hospital?"

"I don't know since there's no precedent. But at the very least, the poison would cause the heroism the person had gained through the Tonic, the mysticality, to disappear. Legends all follow the rules without exception."

"It's like a video game," he said, using an old-fashioned example. "Like the type of boss that can be defeated easily, so long as you know how it's done. The doll is difficult to defeat any other way, but if you know even one ghost story involving dolls…well, they should

be all right."

"…But can we be sure they know any of those ghost stories, though?" his secretary asked, exasperated.

"Maybe not. But it'll work out. Probably."

There was a reason the president of Fantastic Sweeper, Narasaki, was hated by his employees. His secretary vaguely distanced herself from him as well.

"Our monsters aren't weak enough to struggle with a minor Phantasm that's been around for just half a century. The unidentifiable creature Reiji, the original werewolf Getsu, and our little witch, roughly speaking, have three or four millennia behind their abilities."

Narasaki made unreasonable requests, dangerous throws, and killer passes. He sincerely believed in the excellence of his subordinates, and he also was fully aware he was exploiting them, knowing that they had no other place to go.

"Let's push them to their limits. That's the contract they signed… It is the cost for sheltering monsters from society and giving them lives as humans."

*

Meanwhile, inside the ruined building at the scene of the crime…

"Kyeeeeeeeeeee!!!"

With a hysterical shriek, the doll swung around a whip made of supple hair.

It used no martial arts, no technique at all—it was just flailing wildly, like a child swinging a fist around in circles.

But it was incredibly powerful. Facing off against the doll person, Reiji Kasumi melted away into a haze, making shapes like shadow figures one after another before vanishing, appearing and vanishing again, toying with the Phantasm. Despite all his hard work, however —

Thwack! Crack! Thud!

It can easily shatter reinforced concrete. Getsu is one thing, but if Kei gets grazed even once, she's dead.

It was like a giant swinging around an ultra-hard wire rope.

The source of the force was most likely the hair itself. Every single one of the doll's hairs was as elastic as muscle fibers, and the tips of the hairs could move faster than the speed of sound, emitting shockwaves.

Buried by the black hair, the little doll was difficult to see, Moreover—

It can use its hair as both a weapon and armor.

The girlish braid undulated like a giant snake or whip.

Were the doll not swinging its hair around in a frenzy, smashing concrete in a single blow, its hairstyle would have been the height of feminine charm.

At the center of this web of abnormally strong and elastic hair was the doll person, protected by its locks. Time after time, their attacks almost manage to connect, only to be blocked.

"Monochrome Mist Style: A Thousand Black Needles!"

Reiji's drifting mists hardened, becoming countless black needles that were fired like a machine gun.

Thousands of stabs sounded as the flurry of needles rained down on the doll, but as expected—

"So you're good at knitting?!" Reiji cried.

"Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee…! Handicrafts, boo…!"

He'd never imagined he would get an answer, but it made sense.

"So it's good at crafting. Maybe that's why it can use its abilities so well."

The black needles Reiji fired were all blocked by hair woven together like a sweater.

The needles dug into the fibers. Normally, they would pierce right through. But each and every hair undulated, wrapping around and squeezing the projectiles, shattering them quickly like glass.

The hair was like a living bulletproof vest, so to speak. It muted impacts, blocked stabs, and also was too supple to break. In other words, the doll was essentially barricaded in an impregnable fortress.

And its hair whip can catch my true form.

At the end of the day, the difference between Mythic Beasts and Phantasms was just time—the pure accumulation of years and history.

Time had passed since their establishment, and the longer the stories of Mythic Beasts were passed down, the more mysticality accumulated, increasing their rank. But the one they called a Brocken, Reiji, was ultimately of unknown nature and of a lineage so obscure that even a specialist like Narasaki had given up trying to learn about him. Though he likely would have possessed ancient mysticality, he lacked any of the ranks of ancient gods and was being overcome by a young Phantasm because of it.

"The enemy has the advantage," said Reiji. "We have weaknesses, and it has a perfect defense. We have no moves that work, and its attacks will hit hard even if they skim us. Objectively, we're the side that will lose."

"Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! ♪"

That must have amused the doll since it laughed like a mouse from behind its hair.

"Hey, look," said Getsu.

"…Ew!" Kei cried.

"Oh, I see," Reiji commented.

Fed-up looks on their faces, all three said,

"""""So that thing is a man?!"""""

It was a Japanese doll shaped like a girl, but behind its bloody dangling sleeves and open skirts—

—emerging from the doll's smooth crotch, a white husk like a crab shell, was a bulging stick of flesh.

He was erect, indicating his repulsive desire.

"Leave it…here?"
"Money…woman…then…"
"I might…let you…go?"

His voice was grating. But more than that, something else caught Reiji's attention.

"Money and women, even when you look like that? You sure are materialistic… And hey…"

When the doll person had targeted Reiji's weakness and persistently gone after Kei—

—Reiji had assumed that it was strategy, an attempt to wear him down, anticipating that he would defend her.

But the truth was much simpler and much more deplorable.

"Do you emit mystery pheromones that attract Phantasms, Kakiba?"

"I don't know! And besides, I'm not acquainted with any do—" She was going to say *dolls.*

"I know *you*…and the *guy*," the doll muttered. "The couple…who came to…the old man's…funeral. Obnoxious. But a fine girl…!"

"Thank you. But I'm not very glad to receive that compliment." Offering that rather strange reply, Kei shot Reiji a glance. "…I think I know who he is."

"What a coincidence, so do I."

Nakedly exposing his very straightforward desires for money, women, and cars…

They knew someone like that, someone they'd also passed by at the crematory.

"Weren't you going to become a businessman, you good-for-nothing son?" Reiji said sarcastically.

"*Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech!!!*"

That apparently incurred the doll person's wrath.

"It's! Not my fault! They're all idiots! They took it!!! My money! Tried to! Run away with! A hundred million! Treasure!!!"

"Ahh, I see."

His unique tone of voice was hard to comprehend. But they were

able to pick out a few words here and there.

"So his buddies tried to run away with the money that he stole from the casino using the Phantasm Tonic."

"…Sorry, but I'm not even kind of surprised. Of course they would," Getsu grumbled.

Indeed, Reiji thought. *If he's the owner's son.*

They had said he was a university student. He must have gotten in touch with the gangsters through university connections and then joined forces. It didn't matter if they were friends of his or just people he had used, however.

"That's what it means to become a monster."

That was the price for superpowers, psychic abilities that had absolutely no place in modern society or in a normal life.

It was the cost of a cheat—persecution, mistrust, lack of understanding, the destruction of relationships. Promises made to a monster would not be kept, and the coward who deceived them would be praised as a hero. It was standard practice in a story, a commonplace tale you could hear anywhere.

"Did you think people would stick by you? That they would admire you? That you were the sole exception? No way was that going to happen. Sorry, but between your goals and your behavior, you're as average as they come."

"…!!! N-no! Don't…give me that shit! Don't fuck with meeeeeeeee!!"

Even his threats were stale.

Feeling more sorry for him than scared, Reiji was convinced. *He's…still human.*

Phantasms wouldn't talk. They didn't need to. They just moved along in accordance with the laws of their story.

They looked as if they were alive, but that was only superficial—it was impossible for them to depart from the rules and act of their own accord.

Until just a minute ago, the doll person had been very much like that, close to the essence of a Phantasm.

But now he's falling apart.

He was talking on and on when they hadn't even asked him to.

His meaningless and foolish behavior, just spewing information, was proof of that.

He was just like an actor who had deviated from the script and started ad-libbing, ruining the play.

"So you got an introduction from the rag wringer—Arimoto—to buy the Phantasm Tonic?"

"Great connections—riiight…? Eeehee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…! So cheap! Free! Basically! Paid with property! With just one shitty piece of paper! I get…hundred million!!"

With his prideful assertion of dominance, the inhuman doll was revealing his true ugliness.

"Paying with property? Now that you mention it…" Reiji recalled the conversation back at the funeral hall.

The man had quarreled with his mother over something about having brought out some title deed from the inheritance.

"The deed for the building with the girls bar that burned down? You gave that to the dealer?"

"N*ot* that one! That place…is *mine*! I'm different *from* my dad—he only ever ran it like trash! Profit! Mon*eey*! *Money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money!!!* That place *is* mine!"

"Frankly speaking, I don't know anything about companies, businesses, or management. But…"

Reiji mourned this reminder of the man's death.

He had only spoken with him a little and only a few minutes. It was a sad memory. "I felt that he had convictions. 'Agape over eros,' he said. It wasn't just about money. He ran the business with other goals, and he made those come true. He wasn't like you."

"Wha*at*…?!"

"It's of no concern to me what sort of business you run. But I will have you take responsibility for stealing money and lives. That's our business."

"Just *yo*u try. *Brat.*" The doll person poked his face out from underneath the slickly woven hair.

His head was cracked, muscle with the skin peeled off peeking through. A bloodlike fluid was oozing from it.

His goggling round eyes were both perfect miniatures, smaller

replicas of human ones.

"Answer me," said Reiji. "Was it on your orders that Arimoto killed your father?"

"Who cares?" the doll spat. "I told him to dr*op* dead. Then the inheritance—*mine*. My life—turned around! Wish *granted*! Lucky! That's *it,* right?!" The doll cackled.

"You're such an ass… Are you okay with that?" Getsu shot at him, exasperated.

With a look of disinterest, Reiji answered the doll, "They divorced due to your mother's cheating. You reunited with your father as an adult with the goal of extorting money out of him. After he said no, you were unable to show up at the bar yourself, so you sent your underlings to check things out. Is that right?"

Put together all the information, and that was the story.

"If you'd been trying to kill your father, you would have been a little frightened—maybe not outside, but here." But he hadn't been prepared for that. He hadn't had the guts to challenge him. "So you just let things happen and let other people do it. All you actually did was steal the inheritance from your father and take a sketchy drug. And you had to use that to make yourself stronger, or you'd never be able to kill or steal."

"…!!!"

"You're as common as they come. Utterly normal—just petty, greedy scum."

The doll's reply was a groaning whip of hair.

He must have gotten irritated. He faced Reiji and attacked again and again.

However, those writhing locks all swung through the air in vain.

Making a clever adaptation, Reiji abruptly filled the room with white mist. Wafting in its center was a black haze.

In the thick mist of mixed black and white was the outline of a boy—shining in the faint light, blurring and shifting.

"Kyeee?!"

"You were scarier before. Once you started babbling on, you suddenly started seeming like nothing much… Not that I'm surprised. This all happened because you got drunk on your power."

"…*What*…are y*o*u saying…?!"

It was all the same—with cars, video games, weapons, drugs, or violence.

When someone got a hold of something great, they would brag about it and try to show it off.

"Frightening us and making us suffer. You wanted to feel good, didn't you?"

Pleasure. Joy. Fun. Things that hadn't existed for the dead doll as a pure Phantasm.

Those were emotions only a human who had taken the Tonic, a human who was not a doll, would have. A human could not resist joy.

That was especially true for a weakling who would want to take that drug, the type to be dissatisfied with himself as he was—the type who was still too lazy to make the effort to change—that kind of common fool.

"You killed in order to show off," Reiji continued, "You were saying, 'Look how strong I am. Scary, right? Amazing, right?'"

"Wh*a*t?"

"I'm talking about the casino robbery. You could have just stolen the money. But you killed three people. You also killed your allies. You strung them up like that, even showing contempt for their bodies, and you got hard doing it."

I can't have any sympathy for him, Reiji thought.

There was no such thing as a good justification for murder, but even then, this was awful.

Perhaps there was still some room for sympathy for the son's poor family situation. But what about after that? He had received an expensive education and had even gotten into university, only to join a gang. He had extorted money from a father who had no parental visiting rights, and he hadn't even been able to kill him like your garden-variety scumbag. Instead, he had waited for someone to take out his dad for him.

The moment the son had gotten power from the money that had tumbled into his lap, he had killed and robbed and gotten full of himself.

“Amazing. Honestly, it’s impressive how impossible it is to sympathize with you. So…,” Reiji Kasumi said.

“I’ll teach you what a monster is.”
“*Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech*!!!”

An incomprehensible shriek and a groaning whip of hair. Repeated booms like little explosions.

The whip stirred up a whooshing wind that made the mist swirl around. Reiji instantly broke into a run. In a room as cramped as this, there shouldn’t have been anywhere to go, but he bounded off the walls and ceiling as if he were weightless, going in all directions.

“So…fl*oa*ty?!”

“Because you babbled so much, I was able to accumulate enough.”

Wafting and floating, the whip swept up a torrent of destruction, but Reiji avoided it like a balloon floating in a windstorm. His body arched in unexpected ways, and he leaped and spun as if he were a dancing ballerina.

“Monochrome Mist Style: Black Augury.”

His fingers moved in signs for a technique that could only be done in a somewhat closed space.

The mist he’d scattered in the room was a blindfold and would also work as a screen.

The moisture-filled droplets composing Reiji’s body distorted the light, creating a reflection of his body in the mist that was just a few inches off from where he really was.

“Basically, it’s a mirage. What’s wrong, hair flinger? Catch me if you can!”

“*Kyeeeeee!!! …D*on’t you…fu*c*k with m*eeeeee*!” the doll person screamed hysterically, unraveling his Phantasm hair, pointing it like needles, and shooting it straight out.

It was just like the burrs of a chestnut, the spines of a sea urchin, the needles of a hedgehog—a torrent of needles shooting in all directions. Whether you dodged was irrelevant. In response to this

piercing attack, Reiji's mist changed qualities.

Mushy black clay. The white mist turned dark and coiled around the needles of hair, instantly hardening. With that stuck to it, the hair lost its sharpness and even its momentum, becoming heavy as rocks.

"*Ah…?!* What?! I ca*n't*…c*u*t…?! *Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow?!*"

"Your hair grows infinitely, so it wouldn't pull out at the root. I figured hair that never breaks is your rule as a Phantasm. I know nothing about the tales and ghost stories that made you, but—"

Just like a crucifixion—

—the doll person, with his extended hair glued in place, was now bound by his own invincible hair.

"—Monochrome Mist Style: Black Glue. Don't think this will come off easy."

The black adhesive would instantly harden when touched.

It stuck to the doll's hair and wouldn't come out. He wasn't even able to cut it, and he couldn't pull his hair out. In other words—

"*Geh…k-kyeeeee!* Let—*leeeeeeeeet! Let me…go!!!*"

The tables had been turned at the scene of slaughter. Now it was not the corpses of the gangsters caught in a spider's web of human hair…

…but the doll person Phantasm, fastened in place by his own invincible locks.

"*Geh! Kyeee! Kyeeeeee!!!*"

The doll's neck creaked and strained. Cracks spread through its exoskeleton-like shell, and bodily fluids dripped from it.

"It seems that hair is pretty powerful…but not so strong that you could rip out all the walls and floor to free yourself. Well, I figure you could move a bit if you stretch out your hair as much you can, though."

"!"

With no other options, the doll person leaped on that very deliberately granted hint.

Once again, there were slithering sounds. The hairs that weren't caught in the glue stretched out all the way, and the little doll that had been hidden leaped out, bending his jointed fingers like hooks

to attack.

"*Kyeeeeee!!!*"

"…Use your head. No matter how much you extend your hair, so long as you're connected to it, you can't get away."

Reiji's words were cold, and his reactions were quick.

Just by turning aside slightly, he avoided the doll as it leaped toward him, kicking it.

The high kick dug in deep. After slamming the small toy, Reiji stomped on it again and again, not giving it time to resist.

"*Gyee?! Gyee?! Ee! Ow! Owie!* S-*stop…!!*"

"Try saying that to the people you killed. They would never let up."

"…Kyeeee…Eeeek!"

Clear panic and fear showed on the doll's cracked face.

Reiji didn't hold back even the slightest, slamming down the sole of his heel over and over. The fresh blood soaking the doll's kimono splattered around and soiled the cuff of his pants, but he ignored it.

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

"Whether I punch you or hit you, you're half Phantasm. It won't do real damage. So…"

"Kyeee—keee—keee…?!"

"I don't even have to use my abilities. I'll keep going until your spirit breaks."

"Kye—yeeep…!"

At this point, it was just shrieks.

Stomping, kicking, crushing. Protected by the laws of Phantasms as he was, the doll person wouldn't be substantially injured.

However, Reiji's pitiless, single-minded assault was inflicting equal parts pain and fear on the creature.

No matter how he tried to run or how he struggled, the doll could not pull his hair from the floor.

Even if the doll person managed to move by stretching out his hair, he wouldn't be able to hide, stuck to the walls and ceiling as he was. Plus, moving at blinding speeds was meaningless when you were tied down.

"Hyeee—*yeeep…yeeeeek…!*"

He was a miserable sight. His bloody kimono had been stamped with countless shoe marks, just like a dirty rag.

Frightened and cowering, he was just barely covering his face as he curled up.

As Reiji mercilessly continued to kick the doll person's back, watching, Kei's breath caught, and she called out to him. "Isn't that a bit much?"

"It's not enough. Like I just said, basically nothing works on him aside from attacks that fit the rules."

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

He slammed his heel into the doll over and over again, trampling him. When Reiji turned around, there was no sadistic joy on his face. He was just impatient, doing things with a sense of urgency.

"I don't know this doll's story. Since I don't know the rules that determine his weakness, I have no way of ending this. So all I can think to do is shut him up with violence. If there's any other way, I'll hear it. Got any ideas?"

"…What about the Tonic?! If I make Human Tonic again and force him to drink it, wouldn't he turn back…?!"

"I'm not sure… Phantasm Tonic lingers in the body longer than Mythic Tonic."

The hit-and-run centaur had turned back with the passage of time, while the rag wringer hadn't naturally reverted after taking the Phantasm Tonic.

The latter had turned back to normal by taking Human Tonic, but that was after they neutralized him via the laws of his urban legend. Despite how the doll person was cowering, it hadn't taken any significant damage, so they didn't know if it would work on him or not.

"Making him drink a Human Tonic before we neutralize him with his weakness would be a gamble. And it's a dangerous drug to begin with. If we make him drink it without any forethought, we don't know if he'll come out intact."

"…That would be a problem. It's not like I want to kill him."

"Right. So violence it is."

"*Yeeep…?! K-kyeee!!* H-h*e*l…elp?! Sto-*op*…!!!"

Reiji started kicking the doll again. He put the weight of his body on the little figure as it flailed and struggled, stomping on it, but all this accomplished was getting the doll to ooze more fluids; he didn't inflict any large wounds.

He's desperate. Is there really no other way…? Kei wondered. If he were just making an excuse to toy with the doll, he would have looked more like he was enjoying himself.

But the reality was the opposite. His cruelty and biting words were deliberate. They couldn't kill this Phantasm—so long as they didn't know its weakness, the monster was invincible. Hence why he was attempting to break it with violence and threats.

"Relax, I'm good at this sort of thing since I used to have to put up with similar abuse."

"…Huh…?"

"What a miserable-looking face. I'll clean it up for you."

Bam! Grind, grind, grind, grind, grind, grind, grind, grind…!

"*Yeeeeeeeeeeep…!!*"

The doll person was on the verge of tears. Reiji grabbed its tiny head in one hand and rubbed it into the concrete.

However, this only succeeded in grinding down the wall, not the Phantasm itself.

After all, the Phantasm could hardly be injured.

But verbal threats, visuals that inspired fear, and painful-sounding noises would pierce his heart.

It hurt to watch.

It was a reproduction, no…a restaging.

"You're doing…what was done to you before?" said Kei.

"I wasn't as tough as this guy. I bled, and I felt pain. Just like you now, my sister stopped my parents, but it didn't work. They just started doing it in secret."

Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam!

Reiji yanked the doll by the hair, then grabbed its head and slammed its nose into the floor over and over.

"When it was me, they used a corner of the bathroom. They did this to me until all my front teeth broke, though they got better. Can yours break, doll? They probably can't since you're tough. That

means this'll never end. How nice."

"Hyeee, *yeeep…!* N-*no!* Sto…*gyah!*"

Not a single tooth broke, and neither did his nose. Reiji's abuse did no damage to the doll Phantasm.

But the creature's face, tearstained and trembling, revealed sincere fear.

"If you don't like it, then leave," Reiji said to Kei. "Contact my boss and ask how to deal with this."

"…Will you keep that up the whole time?"

"If I take my eye off him and let him escape, then it'll be my responsibility. I won't be able to make up for a mistake like that."

So he wouldn't stop. There was no way he could.

Even if it would gouge at his own heart, hurting it, killing it.

Even if he had to imitate the madness of his parents, who had stabbed his sister and even lit their house on fire.

"I'll make him feel as much fear as I can to neutralize him. This is work, too."

His expression was hollow, emotionless.

It was the look of a man used to pain, numb to it—but of course, there was no way he wouldn't be hurt.

"I'm not going."

"You want to save this guy? Because he's the son of the boss you respected?"

"No. Frankly, I don't like him, either. I basically hate him. But…" Be that as it may. "What I hate even more is watching a friend hurt himself right in front of me."

She paused a moment there to sigh deeply.

"That's why I'm going to stop you, Kasumi. Because you're hurting yourself more than him with that violence."

She said it looking straight into Reiji's eyes, her gaze sincere. The two of them stared at each other.

"…Umm, what do I do here? Whose side should I be on?" Getsu asked, tail hanging between his legs and fur wilting.

“Mine,” said Reiji. “We have no way of neutralizing this thing aside from domestic violence.”

“It’s weird that you’re even considering domestic violence as an option in the first place. We should think of another way.”

Kei Kakiba didn’t know a lot about urban legends. She wasn’t interested in the occult and had never tried to learn about it.

But she was still creeped out by Japanese dolls and French dolls.

“If you had that sort of doll at home, what do you think you should do with it?”

“…Throw it out on trash day?” Getsu cocked his head.

Kei nodded. “Yes, I think that’s the first thing you’d think of. But I doubt that would be an ending for a ghost story. You need to do something different, something that seems right. Something that makes the reader feel, *That would put a stop to things.*”

They were imagining the ending of an urban legend, a ghost story that they had never heard. They needed it to be convincing.

There had to be something you could believe would end the curse and purify the contamination—a more clever way to resolve things than a traumatized boy resorting to violence.

“Ah.”

Then it suddenly hit her.

The cremation smoke rising high into the sky over the funeral hall.

“Have you ever heard of a *takiage*?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s when you bring things like items inherited from the deceased, things that are really hard to throw away, to a temple or shrine so that they can be burned. I don’t know much about them, either, but I just know that it’s a thing.”

You sent off the dead with fire—just like how monsters in horror movies vanished after being swallowed by flames.

A ceremony where you would take items from the deceased,

laced with their memories, and not just throw them away but send them to the other side.

"Let's set the doll on fire. I think that will work."

"…Huh?"

The doll person creaked, his face battered and head still in Reiji's grasp.

With a frightened, fawning face that seemed to say, *You couldn't possibly do something like that,* he squeaked, "No w*ay*. Yo*u*… wouldn't? …You me*an*…burn—*me?!*"

"I think it would be better than hitting you again and again," said Kei. "You don't want it?"

"N*o!* No way! H-he*lp m*e! H-*he*'s craz*y*!"

"How rude. He's not crazy. At this rate, you might not be able to go back to being human," Kei said, reasoning with the doll person from a safe distance away as he flailed around.

In a calm manner, as if she were advising a younger child who was afraid of needles, she said—

"So burn. Don't worry. We'll make sure to end it."

"*N-noooooooooooooo!!!*"

Whoosh…!

The foul smell of burning protein.

The hair of the Phantasm, which had been so strong before, frizzled and shrank nearly to the roots. Hairline burning thanks to a lighter one of the gangsters had left at the scene, the doll person was foaming at the mouth.

"*Agh…gyeeeeee…*"

"You only had to suffer a small fire. Good thing that it burned out right away," Kei Kakiba said, looking down at that thing twitching and spasming at her feet after having thrown a bucket of water on it.

"…This doesn't make sense to me. Hitting is no good, but you're allowed to burn it?" asked Reiji.

"I was thinking the same thing…," admitted Getsu. "That is like torture you learn about in history books."

The moment it had been lit on fire, the once-tough hair of the Phantasm had burned away very quickly.

The doll had rolled around on the ground, his whole body scorched, and they'd rushed to throw some water on him to douse the flames.

Fortunately, Kei's guess about *takiage* had been correct—the doll was entirely neutralized.

"I mean, hitting him didn't work, right?" said Kei. "And he might not have turned back to normal."

"You couldn't assume burning him would turn him back, either."

"It was more likely than hitting him. It was worth trying."

"…I think that's pretty crazy, too, but it actually did work, so it's hard to say…"

It was true that striking the doll's weakness and neutralizing him was safer than breaking his spirit with a prolonged beating.

Though he understood intellectually that Kei's decision was right in that sense—

"…Let's avoid making Kei mad, Reiji," said Getsu. "People like her are the scariest."

"Yeah… Let's watch out."

"How rude. I wouldn't light my friends on fire without a reason."

"I'm scared you'd do it if you had a reason," Reiji shot back.

As they were talking, abruptly—

"But…you saved me… Thanks," Reiji said.

"Huh?"

"Because you got angry on my behalf. The only other person who's ever done that for me was my sister."

"So…thanks," he repeated.

*

"Things worked out. Just like I told you, right?" said company

president Narasaki after hanging up the phone call from the scene. He was at the Fantastic Sweeper office.

"Yes, things worked out… But it was pretty bad how improvised it all was," said Neru.

"You think? Isn't it enough that they succeeded?"

Ceremonies to transfer misfortune into a person-shaped object and then do away with it have been developed in many places of the world since ancient times.

The details of such ceremonies as magic rituals have long since ceased to exist. However, they remained in the form of ancient cultural practices, and those remnants lingered in modernized ceremonial occasions. Cremating dead bodies in a pyre was one such example.

"The bad luck of the dead doll was sent up in a *takiage*," said Narasaki. "If you give him the Human Tonic, he should return to human form soon enough. I don't know if we'll be able to get testimony from him, but well, worst case, we'll be fine without it."

Murder in the Masquerade could basically never be proven.

That was because, without anything to point to a victim's identity, you couldn't match them with faces, fingerprints, or DNA. This time, however, there was a high probability that the victims' identities would be proven by their belongings.

"Since it's just a typical murder and robbery. Doesn't take much to get the death penalty these days, so his future will be grim."

"Mm-hmm?" Secretary Neru listened with a bored expression, her hands clacking away at her keyboard.

Her attitude was cold. She clearly wasn't listening and didn't care, but Narasaki continued to talk at her.

"And it seems that they've managed to get the rag wringer's phone. Think you can make some progress on that investigation?"

"No prob. But…"

She was in the middle of browsing a page on the deep web that ordinary people couldn't log onto—an underground company that catered to a specific clientele, selling illegal items like stolen goods. Having been following the log of products put up for auction, Neru had reached a certain conclusion.

“It seems like it’s true he’s not familiar with the internet. He was only minimally camouflaged, and I found him.”

“Oh my. So then was there no need to go to the trouble of retrieving Arimoto’s phone?”

“We can learn some things from that, so it was worth it. But…”

She opened up an old-fashioned web page modeled after the internet auctions of bygone days.

There was a column of anonymous bids. It had been categorized very lazily as “health care/health foods.”

“Oh my. Is this it?” asked Narasaki.

“Probably.”

The seller was anonymous—a blank space without even a username.

The item description was just a single URL. And it went without saying what that URL directed to.

“That video,” said Neru. “The promo of the rag wringer and the hit-and-run centaur. A new version filmed from a different angle.”

“Only the one who filmed that would have that video. That’s proof that it’s the real thing. So what’s the situation?”

“I’m bidding on the Tonic. Right now, it’s impossible to identify who I’m competing with… Wow.”

“That’s quite a sum. There are many people in the world with time on their hands,” Narasaki said in wonder as he peeked at the screen, lightly pushing up his glasses.

One minute before the auction was going to close, the numbers were soaring wildly. They were looking to reach eight or nine digits.

“Will you bid?” asked Neru.

“I don’t have that kind of money. Even if I did, I wouldn’t want to use it on this.”

The remaining time ticked down. **00:58, 00:57, 00:56**… Second after second elapsed, making the viewers impatient and pushing the bids to go even higher. There were three people who were bidding particularly fiercely, all anonymous, of course.

00:03—¥ 98,000,000

00:02—¥ 99,000,000
00:01—¥ 100,000,000
00:00—¥ 120,000,000 NEW!!

“A win!”

The countdown went to zero, and the auction screen closed.

The rest was just between the vendor and the winner, and nobody else could know about it.

After the screen went black, the reflections of the secretary and the president stared back like ghosts.


Chapter 5
#Infection



The illegal architecture was just like a crusting of scabs.

In Natsukibara, the Masquerade, people were never granted permission to construct new dwellings.

So the only places where they could openly "live" were the apartment buildings and houses from before the area had been designated as the Masquerade. Aside from that, there was just squatting, and management often removed people by force.

But there were still many people who wanted to live in this district. Being so used to wearing masks that they refused to return to the outside world, they surged into buildings where permission was given.

What resulted from this were grotesque buildings, like anthills.

Apartment rooms had been added through DIY-esque construction that ignored anything like building codes.

The tangle of electrical wiring and plumbing was like the roots of a plant or a lump of flesh with bulging veins.

In one of these "addition apartments," on the second floor, in a corner room, there was a window with a view of a wall. It was a mixed residence building that had once been an apartment building, and quite miserably, a ramen shop was on the same floor.

The pungent smell of *tonkotsu* broth wafted from its ventilation fan. They only opened the window when the ramen shop was closed, and while the bathroom and toilet had been renovated recently and were comparatively better, there was no place to put a washing machine, so it was out by the entrance.

There were hardly any other residents—the whole building was owned by Fantastic Sweeper, the property left mostly unused.

Instead of using a guard dog to drive away Beastpeople who

would attempt to squat there, the property relied on two young boys for security. In exchange, they got ten percent off the market rate for rent.

A piece of notebook paper served as their apartment nameplate. It had KASUMI and RAISAN written on it, but…

Someone must have gotten the wrong idea, as there was a heart scrawled around the two names with a marker. It depressed Reiji and Getsu every time they saw it.

"They have so many damn apartments left over. I feel like they could have let us have our own places," said Reiji.

"…We don't have that kinda caaash. That'd be double the rent…," Getsu whined. Reiji Kasumi breathed a deep sigh.

His brush made a rhythmical *kshhh, kshhh, kshhh, kshhh*. Spraying the white porcelain with a nice-smelling blue cleaner, he cleaned yellowish tinges and grime off every little corner, making it sparkling clean. *Sparkling*.

"That's what hurts. It hurts," he said.

"Then…whateeeever…hmm? It's too much…trouble…"

"You're too sleepy. Wash your face or something and wake up. Agh, it's even dirty here. And don't even get me started on the fur. Your shedding. It clogs the drains!"

Plonk, plonk, plonk.

He thrust a giant plunger into the stopped-up toilet to clear the clog. The large volume of shed werewolf hair was a perennial pain. He understood, but still.

"Should they have made it a canine-use toilet during the renovations? Like one with large pipes that won't clog."

The toilet situation in the Masquerade was a surprisingly dire issue.

People drank and ate there, so naturally, they would have to use the bathroom. In the outside world, overeating and over-drinking were regulated in the name of obesity prevention, but the practice stubbornly persisted here, and there was no end of people who came here with that purpose in mind.

Of course what went in would come out again, and when visitors

turned into Beastpeople, even their internal organs would transform, changing not only the composition and shape of their waste but also the manner in which they relieved themselves. Plus, most carnivores, reptiles, and herbivores had tails to worry about.

The water tank got in the way if you tried to sit normally, so it was typical to bring your tail up over your shoulder to use the bathroom, but when Getsu was half-asleep, he would frequently forget and get his tail wet, then panic and wash it.

But his tail was only midsize, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been. When you pulled a large species, regardless of whether it was carnivore or herbivore, you wound up needing a bathtub-like toilet that fit your stature, and there were very few of those around.

There were even some perverts who wanted to relieve themselves outside on the soil or on a puppy mat like an animal—and cleaning that up was another miserable job for the flunkies of Fantastic Sweeper when they weren't investigating Phantasms.

"I suppose the human ones tend to clog more. Agh, what can you do…?!" Reiji bemoaned.

"…Dude, are you…happy…?" Getsu asked.

"No. Don't be ridiculous. Completely hopeless. What can you do…?!" Reiji said, but his lips were upturned so clearly, you could tell through his mask.

It was a smile of elation. It wasn't that he liked cleaning toilets. What he liked was cleaning in general. He loved making the bath sparkle, but scrubbing the toilet was also surprisingly addicting. There was just something so satisfying about putting on rubber gloves and making it all shiny.

"Next time, we'll have no choice but to rent a pressure washer. You're paying when that happens."

"Huhhh…? Seeeriously…? I'm too tiiired… How much are those? Wassa price?"

"Pick one speech pattern and stick with it. Anyway, I think it'll cost ten to fifty thousand."

"That's nasty… You can't just, like, become all gloopy and get rid of it…can you…?"

"I don't think it's impossible, but you're telling me to shove my

whole body into the toilet and clean it. I'm not doing that. Shower clogs are one thing, but I'm not doing the toilet."

A Brocken was an amorphous being, but they still had a sense of touch.

Even if they were the only two people using the toilet, it was too gross. Getsu should have been able to understand that much.

It's because he can't wake up in the mornings. He's still half-asleep.

Werewolves were nocturnal creatures. When the moon was out, his body would be physiologically activated, and his brain would awaken.

When Getsu had gone to get a checkup, the doctor had told him that while he was in werewolf form, his brain would be swimming in stimulants—adrenaline, endorphins, and more.

He wouldn't sleep and would hardly feel any pain. But the transformation came with a high price: It made it hard to sleep at night, and he had the worst time waking up in the morning. In fact, it was so hard that he *couldn't* wake up early, no matter how many alarms he set.

Well, of course.

Poking his head out from the bathroom, Reiji scanned the apartment.

In the poor excuse for a kitchen and the living room, there was hardly anything that could be called furniture.

A secondhand game console, a monitor on top of a stack of magazines as a base. When the two were free, they would stream video sites or free programs. Fortunately, they did have an internet connection, though it was limited to the apartment.

There were two beds—one was Reiji's, the futon already folded up and stored in the closet.

The other was Getsu's. He hadn't been able to drift off the other night, so he'd forced himself to sleep with sleeping pills. A half-finished plastic bottle of water and an empty pill packet sat on his mattress. He was balled up under the blankets to get away from the LED lights.

"It's because you force yourself to wake and sleep when I do. It'd

be way better if you kept a night schedule."

"But liiike…going to school alone is scaaary…and it's lonely. I don't wanna go to night school alooone… Even if it's tough, I wanna go with you…"

"Are you a baby? Don't be so spoiled."

"Don't be so cooold… I'll cryyy. Agh, I'm tiiired…"

He wriggled like a cocoon in the blankets.

They had stayed up practically all night. The two had sent Kei back before the last train, but after that, they needed to clean up the bloody murder scene, deal with the bodies, and question the man who had transformed into the doll person—the dead doll.

Frankly, Reiji was dead tired, too.

But when he woke from his nap and went into the bathroom, he'd discovered it was clogged with shed canine fur.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been since it was early in the day, but still, waking up after not enough sleep to clean the toilet immediately was mentally taxing, and he really wanted to complain, but— *We both have it rough.*

He couldn't bring himself to blame his partner, and it was faster just to do the job.

Once again, Getsu called out like he was dying, "We caught the culprit… Why can't we question him again…?"

"Head office is dealing with it. We were able to get as much as we could out of him before handing him over."

After the dead doll had passed out from his hair being burned, they injected him with Human Tonic and turned him back into a powerless human.

Less than an hour passed before the BT head office had taken him in. However, the two boys had forced him to talk in the interim.

"The moment we said we'd call for Kakiba, he squealed. Seems like that drug really worked," said Reiji.

"That's scaaary… I meeean, Kei didn't even hesitate to light him on fire…"

True, Reiji found himself agreeing. The former dead doll had acted pretty brazen, but the moment they'd played like they were going to call for Kei after she'd left, he'd grown absolutely terrified

and had spilled everything.

"We were able to retrieve that good-for-nothing's and Arimoto's phones. Did you see the results I passed to Neru?"

"Nah…I didn't. We already got results? That fast…?"

"Well, yes. We got the login to the illegal auction from their phones."

There were two smartphones. Both had been illegally modified to access the deep web.

Modern black markets were stuffed with tons of illegal goods. While the information of the seller, bidder, and winner were all protected— "I don't know how she did it, but Neru found the Phantasm Tonic that was auctioned last night. She figured out the bidders' IDs, too. We don't know who the winner was, but it's a lead."

"…So that's what we're investigating today?"

"After school. We have a mountain of other assignments, though…"

Like the question of the missing hundred million yen.

In a final act of stubbornness, the dead doll had firmly refused to say where it was.

"Did the gangsters he killed take it away, or did the son hide it?" Reiji wondered. "If we have time, we should search the area of the crime. There are also the real estate documents he stole."

From the official documents, they had managed to investigate a bit into the property that the previous owner had held.

"The son just stole the title deed, and he didn't take the officially registered seal. Apparently, he had no clue about the procedures for name transfer, and he thought it would be his if he just took that."

Since the procedures for inheritance weren't even complete in the first place, it counted as misappropriation or theft.

Reiji knew little about outside laws, so it was difficult for him to understand, but the Masquerade land and buildings that the owner had held—the real estate documents for the multiple properties, including the girls bar building—had not been found.

"Apparently, the owner is actually wealthy. He had over ten apartment buildings and businesses just inside the Masquerade.

Though the only one he really put effort into working on was the former girls bar building."

"Why…? Wouldn't he just get taxed…?"

"Since it was in a lawless district, his estate was seen as worthless, so all he had to pay was the fixed asset tax. But if he were to lease them out or run businesses, the state would take a big cut. So it was cheaper just to leave them."

"…Being rich is a hassle."

"Agreed."

Reiji frankly didn't really understand it, but it seemed that wealthy people had their own problems.

On that note, he finished cleaning the toilet, removing his stuffy face mask and rubber gloves.

Feeling free and refreshed, he was washing his hands with lots of hand soap when—

"So we're investigating that, too…?" asked Getsu.

"Eventually. Our boss's instructions were to prioritize tracking the Phantasm Tonic that's been disseminated."

The dead doll had said that he'd given up the title deed he'd stolen to pay for the Phantasm Tonic.

If the registry on the outside took action, then Neru could pick up on that from official routes. But if such procedures were avoided, and the new deed owner secretly used abandoned land and buildings…

"We have no choice but to investigate directly. It's possible the string-puller frequents the place. It's a major clue, but…"

He could understand the boss's decision to pin down the black market Tonic leak first.

Following the string-puller was also important. But doing nothing about the Phantasm Tonic or the Mythic Tonic was bound to lead to lots of harm. Deaths, injuries, and financial damages. And on top of that— *"What if a really dangerous product leaks? The world might actually be in trouble, ♪"* the boss had said quite bluntly with a smug look. Remembering that was more irritating than frightening.

"We have to track the black market Tonic, secure it, and keep the damage in check. And we have to follow the string-puller and catch

him. We need to do both. I know we were just working last night, but it's more again today, Getsu."

"I knooow… We've got some hints on like…who won the Tonic, right…?"

"Neru is rushing to identify the bidders from the IDs she figured out. Though she said it will take some time."

"She can do that…? Whoa, amazing as always…"

"People who have mastered modern technology are the real magicians these days. That's way more magical than a witch or a wolf man or some guy made of mist."

Adapting to society and learning skills that seemed like magic put you a cut above.

At the very least, Neru's skills were very transferable, being in great demand at other companies as well.

"We only have this place. I really envy her," said Reiji.

"…Yeah, huh. But like, I'm sorry… My head isn't working, and my stomach hurts…"

"Hey, you've seemed off today."

"No way…" His voice was sluggish, completely exhausted.

The blankets wriggled, and Getsu Raisan poked his head out from where he was curled up.

Wearing a tank top and shorts instead of pajamas, he was as pale as a sheet.

"You look terrible… Can you shave that?"

"I think it'll be hard. And sorry, but it's that time…"

Getsu's whole body was covered in fluffy, soft fur.

It was different from his usual werewolf form. His face and bone structure were essentially human. But his entire body was covered with fine fur, and even with a mask, it didn't seem like he could hide the change in his appearance.

The name of the ancient disease responsible for this was *weresickness*.

It originated from European werewolves, monsters who disguised

themselves as men in numerous villages and then devoured villagers at night. A terrifying epidemic. Tales of a similar illness had appeared in ancient Japan, but in the modern era, the werewolves there had been wiped out.

Werewolf numbers had also declined significantly in Europe due to disease control and werewolf hunts. Now it was said there were just a few individuals remaining deep in Southern Asia.

And the pure werewolf was thought to be entirely extinct.

There were weretigers living in Asia—even in human form, they had no heels and stood on their toes. Then there were also the devil pigs, said to live in the south, and the mad bears of Northern Europe.

But of all the various stories and legends of humans transforming into beasts—being greatly affected by the phases of the moon and with their powerful infectiousness and immortality—werewolves themselves were the most shunned representatives of weresickness.

"I heard it was in the countryside somewhere," said Reiji. "A strain of the sickness."

"Yeah…apparently. I also dunno where, though."

In Europe, weresickness was even thought to have gone extinct due to the witch and werewolf hunts.

But in the remote regions of Japan, in a certain village, a virus was extracted from a survivor of old local customs—an elderly man who had died in prison after going mad from the full moon and slaughtering dozens of people. The virus was then placed in several experimental subjects.

One of whom was Getsu Raisan.

"…I'd really like to tell them not to get up to that crap, though."

"The wild Japanese wolves have gone extinct, but the Japanese wolf man has been revived. Isn't that worth celebrating?"

A normal wolf would be the prime attraction at a zoo.

But the return of wolf men wouldn't please anyone—just scare them.

"Did you take your Tonic?" asked Reiji.

"I figured I'd take it after breakfast, so not yet… Sorry, but just make me whatever…"

"…We just barely have some bread and eggs left over. I guess we can get by with that."

In a corner of their tiny kitchen was an ancient fridge. They'd picked it up from bulky waste, but it still worked.

Inside were slim pickings, just one bag of hard bread and some condiments, plus eggs and milk. They were out of vegetables right now, save for a few just barely expired pickles.

"Pickled veggies and bread don't go together…," Getsu groaned.

"Don't get greedy. It was cheap. At least it has flavor…" Taking the milk out of the fridge for the time being while casually checking the expiration date, Reiji wondered, "Isn't it early? It was supposed to be tonight."

The wallpaper they'd replaced themselves was a cheap white.

The tacked-up calendar featured the month with an illustration, which Getsu checked from a distance. "Maaan… It's sometimes a bit off… My insides hurt…" He listlessly curled up in his blankets. His pallor could be seen through the thin fur on his face.

This was one of the symptoms of weresickness: a partial transformation that depended on the phase of the moon.

If the moon was full, he would get stronger, while if it waned, he would grow weaker. His impulses were irregular, and it was hard to manage.

"It's like a seesaw, huh? What an inconvenient ability, fluctuating like that."

"My insides are killing me… This is such a pain in the ass… Just smash that full moon…"

"If that happened, humanity would be destroyed. Keep your stomach warm and rest a little more. I'll make you breakfast."

"Okaaay… Sorry I'm so useless…"

On the day before a full moon—they often called it "that time" or "that day"—Getsu Raisan would become unwell.

He would continue to be half-transformed even during the day, and he had to take a weakened version of Human Tonic, a pill that was especially prescribed for him to keep the symptoms at bay or risk losing his mind and going out of control.

The biggest issue with weresickness was the monthly madness.

This was what had made coexistence with humanity impossible when the epidemic had once swept Europe and what had ultimately resulted in the slaughter of the werewolves.

In order to suppress the madness, Getsu took Human Tonic once a month. The side effects were anemia, fatigue, headache, stomachache, and strong depressive symptoms. Along with Reiji's Human Tonic, the high cost of the drug took up most of their household budget.

"Your nose won't work when you're like that. How about you rest instead?"

"I can't do that…" Getsu buried himself face down in the pillow, out of strength.

"What can you do?" Reiji muttered to his partner as he breathed weakly in sleep.

"Guess I'll make french toast."

*

"…What a girly thing to be eating first thing in the morning," Mei commented.

"It's good, and it's fast, and it's simple. Also, the milk was almost expired," said Reiji.

At Akanebara Municipal High School, in classroom 2-A, in an isolated-feeling corner of the room.

It was early morning, and the other students weren't there yet. They were in the back row, where one of the built-in chairs had been removed to accommodate Mei's wheelchair.

When the boys came in a little late, Mei Mezuki gave them a mildly aggrieved glare. "Huh? When my mom made it, she was really lazy about it. It was like she would toss milk and sugar into the eggs, soak the bread in it for hours, and fry that with butter."

"She had the order backward. You put the sugar and spices into the milk, warm it in the microwave, and then put the old bread in that. I don't really know, but I think heat or something is involved,"

he said carelessly. “If you do that, then the milk will soak into the bread right away, so then you coat it with the beaten egg and fry it however with margarine, and it’s done. Even with old bread, it’s soft and nice to eat.”

“Are you a housewife? Where did that girly streak of yours come from?” She shot Reiji Kasumi a look as he showed off the potato-resolution photo he’d taken of their breakfast that morning on his phone.

“Chores are important. It’s what my nonexistent little sister would want me to do.”

“…I see. Well, I don’t really get it, but I’ll stop badgering you about it. Is this about some anime or something?”

“I mean, she did exist, but she doesn’t anymore. Don’t worry about it.” He snapped his cell phone shut. Putting away the antique flip phone, not even a smartphone, he commented on his partner, who was slumped face down on the desk across from him, “As you can see, Getsu is having a rough time of it. He won’t die, so don’t worry.”

“Uh, of course I’m gonna worry. Is it a cold?”

“Something like that. Headache, stomachache, anemia, depression, and such.”

“Urrrgh… I’ll be fine. I’m listening…” Getsu Raisan had just barely gotten to school by leaning on Reiji’s shoulder, and now he was sitting in his chair, unmoving.

Or rather, he couldn’t move. He had aggressively shaved just the fur on his face, making his cheeks red here and there from razor burn. Now his cheek was flat on his desk, and he wasn’t so much as twitching.

“What kind of complex illness is that? …You guys have some difficult physical makeup.”

“Being special is generally inconvenient. I don’t understand the idiots who would pay to get like that.”

“We had an idiot who tried to kill a hit-and-run asshole and did hit-and-runs herself, an idiot who got some weird stuff and couldn’t turn back, and an idiot who murdered and robbed a casino and had a falling out with his buddies. You don’t have to understand people

like that," Mei said as if she found them all worthless. They had given her the gist of what happened with the third Phantasm Tonic and the dead doll.

"They're all such idiots," she said. "A bunch of petty people who weren't prepared to become murderers without a drug."

"Maybe," said Reiji. "I bet if you really wanted to kill someone, Mei, you would do it yourself."

"Of course. Whether you go down from a knife or superpowers, the experience of death is the same. So it'd feel way better to look someone right in the eye, sober, as you stab them."

"…How violent. But understandable," Reiji said, accepting her extreme statement. "A long time ago, right in the middle of the epidemic, there were apparently a lot of similar incidents."

People's fear and resentment toward society had built up until they exploded in a spree of gruesome incidents.

The occurrences weren't driven by hate toward particular individuals but by vaguer ideas. Murders and assaults stemming from baseless malicious intent toward certain categories of people—men, women, drunks, sex workers, and the like.

"At the end of the day, maybe anyone would have done them. Maybe they would be satisfied by going on a rampage and destroying something valuable, just like a child throwing a tantrum will break their toys," he said.

So the weapon used for it had to be special.

Not a common knife or blade or a practical weapon like a handmade gun.

"As a gimmick that makes you feel special and does away with the reluctance to kill…the Phantasm Tonic is effective. It's not enough to just be an attacker targeting random people. It's not interesting, and you can't brag about it."

"That's how an idiot would think," said Mei. "So then you're saying we have three people trying to do that?"

"Yeah. We got a call from Neru. I'm impressed she was able to narrow it down so much in such a short period of time."

Secretary Neru must have pulled an all-nighter. Drawbacks aside, Reiji and Getsu were still Mythic Beasts, and they were exhausted.

But there wasn't any sign that Neru had gone home, and she had basically been at work the whole time.

And so they had gotten some information from her while on the way to school.

"Can you pull up your social media, Mei? You can just browse it."

"Sure… Ohhh, you can't see it with those antique phones, huh?"

"Not like I really want to go on it. But still, it's obligatory. Eventually, I'll have to buy a giant rainbow cotton candy or something and upload a picture that makes it seem like I'm sharing it with a boyfriend."

"Don't try to imitate high school girls, ugh," Mei said, but nevertheless, she pulled out her phone and launched the app to browse social media.

Reiji pointed at the search field on the LCD and inputted a number of keywords. "One of the bidders is a popular streamer on a video site, I think. He sells get-rich-quick schemes and runs a business management consulting company."

"Ah…I know him. A while back, he did a collab with a celebrity who was on TV or in the media, and people were talking about him a lot because he's handsome. What was his name again?"

"Kuraiyami Darkness, streaming group representative…so it says."

His profile picture showed a young man whose face was covered by a mask.

He was a handsome man with a mysterious air and an attractive, slim frame.

"With that face and those clothes, he looks wealthy."

"…He also has social status. Frankly, it seems like he doesn't need to use the Phantasm Tonic."

"I don't know. If he made a video with a thumbnail with bold text saying, 'I got the Phantasm Tonic Everyone's Talking About!!! Does it work?!' then it might actually pay off. And maybe he could write off the cost of the auction win as a business expense."

"That sounds so unpleasantly plausible…"

The next thing Reiji brought up was the opposite of a top streamer—someone with only a few hundred followers.

It was a middle-aged man, his icon a closeup of an exaggerated

funny face.

"Self-proclaimed comedian *Pika☆Run*…," said Reiji. "Well, it goes without saying."

"Looks like a rip-off," Mei commented.

"So blunt. Well, you're basically right."

He had a plump figure and a put-on smile. Checking the links he posted on social media to a video site revealed he was uploading videos practically every day, but each video had less than a thousand views.

"He's constantly updating his social media and frequently replies to others…but he's so conspicuously clueless, people apparently find him pretty annoying. Though this is just what I heard from Neru," said Reiji.

"The comment section of his videos is interesting, in a way. It's like a model on how to bash someone without breaking regulations."

In a completely controlled society where networks were censored, people would be held responsible for any doxing, attacks, or cancellations they participated in. In order to avoid harm from the lowering of their credit score, they would leave gentle insults.

"Perhaps you should try some skincare? Your pores are quite apparent."

"How funny. But the thumbnail needs work. I feel like I've seen it before."

"Why not post a little less often? Please take your time to make some nice videos!"

Glancing at these comments, Mei snorted and said bluntly, "In other words, 'Your face is gross,' 'You're boring, you lame rip-off,' and 'Your videos are boring, so stop posting.'"

"…You're so good at translating nastiness, Mei."

"People said similar things to me when I was in track. And like… he's a self-styled celebrity with basically no career, isn't he? Would he have the money to bid at an illegal auction?"

"He apparently has an inheritance from his parents. He lives in the city and owns his house. Selling it would easily make him two hundred million, apparently."

“Oh yeah, how much was the winning bid?”

“A hundred and twenty million.”

To Reiji, this was a dazzling sum of money. It was so much it didn’t feel real. “All I can bring myself to feel about it is that people who have it, have it. I have no urge to be jealous.”

“Isn’t it stupid to throw down over a hundred million because you want to be a crazy monster?” said Mei.

“It is. Next is the third, the last bidder. This one is a little awkward.”

The final social media profile he displayed was that of a boy in his mid-teens.

“Yuuichi Kitajima, sixteen years old. A first-year in high school. He’s currently enrolled in Akanebara Municipal High School.”

“Huh?”

This unexpected connection made Mei give her phone a look like a cat that had smelled something strange. “…So he’s our junior, a year younger than us? I’ve never seen him before.”

“Because he’s in a different year. His parents run a medical corporation, a hospital in the city. He’s an upper-class rich kid, but he’s been fighting with his parents lately, and he complains on social media a lot.”

The profile picture was that of a basic-looking boy.

He was no one, like an NPC, someone you’d forget a few seconds after looking away.

The picture featured a blank and unremarkable face with a forced smile.

“A doctor’s kid, huh? Is he smart?” asked Mei.

“His grades are apparently below average. We didn’t need to get that information from the school to find that out since he posted it himself.”

They casually browsed through his timeline, going through posts that were the definition of an active teen life.

It was all about coffee breaks at popular cafés, going to hang out with his friends at karaoke, disinfecting the mic before passing it around while they maintained social distance, then studying at the cram school that claimed to have a high pass rate into famous

universities…

"…Why would someone with such a great life at school be doing something like this?" asked Reiji.

"Hearing that from a guy who's been excluded from the first day he transferred in and wound up a total loner…" Mei side-eyed him.

"Who are you calling an excluded total loner? That cuts deep, you know."

From what they saw of his publicly available information, he didn't seem like the type to bid a huge amount of money on an illegal net auction.

A successful streamer. A self-styled comedian. A rich kid.

"So one of them is the culprit, or rather…the one who bought that crazy dangerous Tonic," said Mei.

"That's right. So after school, we were planning to split up to investigate…"

"So that's what's happening?"

"That's what's happening."

"…Sorrrrrrrry… I'm tiiired…"

They glanced over to see Getsu, still face down on the desk as he listened.

Reiji had explained his condition as him being a little sick, but he looked just like—

"You're not a girl, are you?" asked Mei. "Did you eat a High School Girl Fruit and get a monthly period, or something?"

"…Nooo! This is really bad…"

"It does seem like you're having a rough time. I brought some hot tea for lunch. Want some?"

"Thank—wait. Kei?" Suddenly hearing her voice, Getsu absentmindedly lifted his head to see someone unexpected.

It was early morning, and there was no one in the classroom aside from them. Kei Kakiba had just now opened the door and come in, removing the wireless earbuds that were synced with her phone as she pulled a thermos out of her school-designated bag.

"Here I am. Just heard about how you're feeling," she said.

"Huh? Really?"

"Having the same conversation two or three times over is a waste

of time, isn't it?" Mei said with a wave of her phone.

Her dark phone screen had been set to speaker on her online call app.

"So I can thankfully keep up on the conversation," said Kei. "But why call us here so early in the morning?"

"I wondered the same thing," said Mei. "We could do it at lunch or after school."

"…School is the best place to meet. If we called you to the Masquerade, it would be hard to talk your way out of it if someone saw you. Get reported, and the decline in your lifestyle choices might decrease your credit score."

In this ultra-controlled society, the decline of one's credit score was immediately harmful in terms of finances, as it decreased one's credit limits for electronic payments. And once you were an adult, notes from your educators and your disciplinary history would influence your ability to get into university and be hired.

I don't want people observing us meeting up at all.

Even at lunch hour, talking while nibbling away at their lunches would certainly feel like a fulfilling teen thing to do and would be a lot of fun. Reiji even felt that way himself. He really wanted to do it, he wanted to try it. But that was— *Stupid selfishness. Of course it wouldn't be allowed.*

They were animals who had just barely received the right to participate in human society as compensation for being exploited by that society. If they were to do anything in public that hinted at them and the girls being connected, it was bound to lower the girls' credit scores.

"It's best for us to keep our distance at school. I'm glad that we can be friends, but not like that."

"…You're so upright in strange ways, as usual. Agh, what a hassle…!" Mei groaned.

"But I think it's for the better… Thank you for being considerate," Kei said meekly.

Reiji looked away coldly. "…It's nothing. Well, people won't be looking in the classroom in the mornings, and it's nothing suspicious. Though I'm sorry for calling you here when so much happened last

night.”

“I don’t mind. But did you guys get paid overtime?”

“There’s no such thing as overtime pay for us. It’s an exploitative small business with no recognition for human rights.”

“That old man is seriously unethical by modern standards…” Mei’s tone was exasperated. But Reiji and Getsu were Special Permanent Beasts without human rights, so they weren’t in a position to change jobs.

Shooting them sympathetic looks, Kei also let out a small sigh. “I’m in a little money trouble as well.”

“Really?” said Mei. “Work for me, and I’ll pay you right.”

“Thank you, Mei, but that will take time. If I’m without income in the meantime, the orphanage will go under.”

“…Ahhh.”

Kei Kakiba did not indulge in luxury.

She maintained high grades and an upright lifestyle. Designated as lifestyle and social support level B—she was made an honor student and received support for things like rent and food for living on her own, but the orphanage that had raised her was in decline.

She had to work in secret in the Masquerade at night and donate her pay to the orphanage, or the place where kids who were basically her younger siblings lived might close their doors. That was why an honor student like her was doing something so dangerous in the first place.

“Last night, Mr. Garoo asked if I knew where to get any Tonic that lets you pick what you transform into, like the kind we used at the bar.”

“Ah…that stuff that you use…?” said Mei.

With the Monster Tonic sold in the Masquerade, you couldn’t pick what you transformed into.

That was why every day was a dice roll for women working in the service industry. If they transformed into a type of Beastperson that men didn’t like, then it would hurt their workplace’s sales. In that regard, the high school bunny girl club that Kei had worked at before had been groundbreaking.

“A girls bar staffed with only bunny girls in high school. That’d get

you a big haul of dirty old men," said Mei.

"Apparently, sales were good," said Kei. "Only the owner knew that I was the one making the product. So I think that Mr. Garoo was just trying to find out if I knew anything." But still, when she thought about having a regular income… "He seems willing to pay a high price for it. Should I make it for him?"

"…That would be a bad idea."

There was definitely demand—possibly so much that it would pose problems.

The owner had hidden where he'd gotten it to avoid trouble. *Anyone* visiting the Masquerade would want a Tonic that let you pick what you turned into, after all, not just people working in the service industry.

"I won't say that Mr. Garoo is untrustworthy, but it's an issue of safety. Selling a sketchy handmade drug isn't just a gray zone but a black zone. You shouldn't do it," said Reiji.

Kei had special abilities—using ingredients that she had picked up from the ruined kitchen, she had been able to improvise a Human Tonic.

This was clearly more profitable than what Reiji or Getsu could do. Leagues more profitable, it was fair to say.

Right now, there was no sign that their boss was reporting her abilities to BT head office. Reiji had an idea of why.

This is the boss we're dealing with. He's plotting something.

He was a slippery man who could be likable, but behind that facade, he was sharp as a tack and not one to be careless around. It was highly likely that he was saying nothing because he had some plot to outmaneuver the head office.

But if the head office found out about Kei Kakiba, about the existence of an unknown person with special powers— "Worst case, you'll be caught. If you don't want to lose your human rights, then don't," said Reiji.

"By the police? I haven't done anything illegal, though."

"By BT head office security—they're more trouble. Not only do they have money and power, but they also have a history of using public institutions, and they can even inquire about your citizen

registration number. So long as you have social standing on the outside, you won't be able to escape them."

In this ultra-controlled society, without a registration number, you couldn't ride the train or use electronic money.

Unless you were living in a cave, it was impossible to avoid being tracked.

"They're even worse than our boss. I warn you, don't do anything funny."

"…I see," she said. "Then I'll look for other ways to make money. I can keep helping you, but be that as it may, the orphanage is like a home to me."

"Please stick to legitimate means of earning. Worst case, you could work at our company…though I don't recommend it. Nightlife would probably treat you better. I don't think you want to clean up bodies."

"…No, I really don't."

"I appreciate the honesty. Let Getsu sleep. We'll have him work after school. It's best to let him save his strength."

"When he's like this?"

"If possible, I'd like to stop the culprit before they take the Phantasm Tonic."

Reiji had thought the same thing about the dead doll the other night.

If they had been just a little earlier, just one day faster getting the information, they could have avoided any unnecessary sacrifices.

He was no god. He wasn't so arrogant as to think he could save everyone, but…

"We earn trust through minimizing sacrifices and contributing to society as much as we can. We do it to maintain and improve our lifestyles."

At the end of the day, it was about desire.

They sought better results because they had wishes they wanted to come true.

This wasn't volunteer work. They wouldn't keep going purely out of goodwill. They needed an incentive, too.

"Well, enough about that… Who do you think is the most

suspicious?" asked Mei.

"This one." Reiji pointed to the famous streamer, the first one he had shown. "Simply because he has money. He would have no problems throwing around large sums of cash."

"So you're saying he has enough to invest a lot of money into an auction he can't verify, where he might be fed a fake. That seems like more likely than an unemployed, self-styled comedian or a high school student."

"The comedian apparently also has the cash. So for now, we plan to start with investigating these two."

"What about the first-year kid? His parents are loaded, right?"

"I really doubt he could get a hold of a hundred and twenty million. He'd lose his parents' support," said Kei.

"I agree," said Mei. "So I'll give investigating him a shot myself."

That unexpected proposal gathered the attention of both Reiji and Kei.

Eyes on the social media account on screen, Mei smirked at the two of them. "Unlike you loners, I've got social skills. It'll be a piece of cake to ask my old club juniors about his reputation or about how he's been lately."

"I feel bad about making the client do work for us, though," said Reiji.

"It's better than letting you guys do it. Can you hold a decent conversation with anyone who isn't sitting here now?"

"…Got me there. Frankly, I don't know how to talk to people."

Reiji actually hadn't been able to go to school since elementary age.

And Getsu had been born and raised in a research facility, so he really didn't know a thing. He had a cheery personality, so he had the aptitude, but— "He's in pretty bad shape right now," said Reiji. "You really don't mind?"

"Of course. I wanna contribute, too."

Letting someone else do things and just waiting for answers was surprisingly tough.

"I don't really feel it if I'm just paying you guys. It's like I'm not doing anything, and it makes me weaker. Let me do it."

Reiji and Kei were even more uneasy.

Mei Mezuki smiled at the pair—they seemed cold but were strangely softhearted.

*

That evening after school.

In certain spot in a high-class residential neighborhood…

"…So let's do some real, hardcore illegal investigating!"

A masked boy hid in the shadows, holding a rather disquieting conversation. "If we get caught, I'll testify that you instigated us into doing it, Boss," he replied coldly to the voice coming from the receiver, touching the old-fashioned cell phone to the polyurethane mask on his cheek.

"Just don't get caught," said Narasaki. *"By the way, if the police do apprehend you, basically everything will be your fault. It would tank your rock-bottom credit score to the level of an animal, so watch out."*

"…We don't have the right to refuse? Just checking."

"No. We're a cleaning company with no right to investigate or make arrests. Legitimate investigation was never an option, and we don't have the material to make the police or BT head office do anything. Which means…," he said gloatingly, *"you'll be the hero who keeps this incident from happening. That hits you right in your boyish heart, doesn't it?"*

"I think that's more like little kid territory if anything… And like…" Reiji Kasumi let out a shallow sigh. "Isn't it unreasonable to tell us to sneak into someone's house to get evidence, Boss?"

"But it should be pretty easy for you, no? The security systems aren't going to anticipate a creature that turns into mist and comes in through the air vents. Though using your abilities outside of the Masquerade is prohibited, I'll overlook it just this once," he finished off in a patronizing manner and then hung up.

"…That old man totally thinks of me as nothing more than a

tool…”

Class was over. Since Reiji had been dying from lack of sleep, he hadn’t paid much attention.

He had just barely succeeded at resisting sleepiness. Most high schoolers could apparently watch online class videos from their phones and do online class prep and review, but he didn’t have the right to.

He pulled the tab with a *pshhh* sound.

There was plenty of caffeine and sugar in the energy drink, the carbonation a little on the strong side.

“So gross!!!”

He tossed back the ultra-carbonated, high-caffeine, sparkling coffee—it was so bad that it woke him up.

Beast Tech was the dominant player in the modern beverage industry. Not only did they monopolize shares of Monster Tonic, but their tea, soft drinks, beer, and bottled water also sold like crazy, with “clean and safe” as their motto.

A new maker trying to break into that market would generally be either weird-tasting or crazy, but…

“I like them…even though you know they’re not going to be good.”

The bargain products were piled high in big-box stores and volume retailers, drinks made by dubious second and third-rate manufacturers.

The taste was absolutely IQ-lowering. The aroma of coffee, stimulating carbonation, and the thickness of the syrupy sweeteners all came together to make something unpleasant. But sometimes, you wanted that kind of uniquely sharp and harsh flavor.

Thinking this as he checked over the manufacturer and brand name of the can he’d just finished, Reiji went on his phone.

He pulled a particular number from his address book and called it. The person on the other end connected within two rings.

“This is Bravo team agent Ramune. I can see the target.”

“…Don’t get started with the weird code words. What are you trying to do, Kei Kakiba?” Reiji shot back quite seriously.

“How rude,” Kei said. “If we’re going to do something bad

anyway, then I wanted to play at being a member of a shady organization."

"Don't say that like you take it for granted. What's a shady organization?"

"You don't have to worry about it, Agent Ditchwater Juice."

"Don't kick it up a notch. And why do you want to give me a beverage for my agent name?"

"Alcohol names are traditional. But we're minors."

"So you do want to follow the law. That's a relief. Maybe I'm not the one who should be saying this, but you act in a pretty antisocial way."

"I obey the law and respect it. It's just that other things should be prioritized sometimes."

"…That's a pretty hardcore way to live."

"If you're casually willing to break the law for your own convenience, then you aren't respecting it," Reiji thought of making that comeback, but before he could get the words out of his mouth — *"You work for a company that gives you illegal orders. Do you have room to talk? You're complicit."*

"Don't say that. It'll drain the life out of me… And what do you mean by 'ditchwater,' anyway? It's true that this tastes bad, but it's not from a ditch. Also, I'm really sorry about our boss. I don't mind if you just leave Getsu behind and leave."

"I can't do that. I've gone too far on this ship to turn back."

"I think you should get off this ship. Even if we are in a hurry, this is going too far."

While lurking in a back alley, Reiji looked up.

He was on the street by a high-rise apartment, a dazzlingly tall building.

Looking up the wall, he saw that his goal point was dozens of yards above ground level—the forty-fourth floor, the air conditioner on the veranda.

The apartment where it was installed was occupied by the streamer Kuraiyami Darkness.

"Even if Neru found out his private information for us, this investigation's totally illegal…"

Still, they had no alternative.

Beast Tech was entrusted with managing the city—keeping the peace—in the Masquerade, so Fantastic Sweeper taking some aggressive measures posed no problems, as it was a lawless district in the first place.

There was no public authority that you could complain to. But obviously, the suspects this time around lived normal lives in the outside world. Not being police or anything, Reiji and company had no authority to investigate.

"But we can't just do nothing, right?" Kei's voice came from the receiver. *"If one of the three won the bid and we let them go, someone will be killed again, or something even worse will happen. If we can stop them, we should."*

"I agree. But I don't like dragging you into this."

"I don't recall ever being dragged in. I'm participating of my own accord," she said flatly.

"…Tell me one thing." Realizing that he couldn't fight her, Reiji said, "What do you have to eat to get that kind of self-esteem?"

"Hanamaru hamburg steaks. The fish ones."

"The ones wrapped in red plastic? Those are good, I get that. But I'm being sarcastic."

"I know. But since I decided I would help you, I don't want just to be protected."

"Between you and Mei, it's like all high school girls these days have the warrior mindset…"

"I'm from the era of girls who grew up watching popular anime about girls in real fights. This is normal."

"…Is that how it works? Doesn't make sense to me, but okay."

On the other end, Kei Kakiba and the incredibly unwell Getsu Raisan were in the old town a block away.

Another of the suspected auction winners lived there—the self-styled comedian, *Pika☆Run*.

"Avoid direct contact. You just have to watch him."

"Roger, Ditchwater."

"…Do you like that code name?"

"Quite a bit."

Her taste makes no sense to me…

Heedless of Reiji's thoughts, a slight silence passed on the phone.

For a questionable moment, he sensed that Kei was waiting in anticipation for something—

"…I'm counting on you, Agent Ramune."

"Oh, now I'm feeling motivated. Leave it to me."

"I can't believe I picked the right answer there… How old are you?"

Hanging up the phone and tucking it in his pocket, he was struck by something like a headache.

He didn't dislike Kei. In fact, he thought she was a good person, and he was grateful to have her around since she hadn't changed how she acted toward him even after learning he was a monster. But she could be oddly hard to figure out.

"Is this the sort of thing guys find attractive…? Are all high school girls these days like that, and am I just clueless? I don't know because everything I thought I knew about high school girls is falling apart…!"

He'd only just met her two weeks ago anyway.

Maybe it would be stranger to feel like he understood her after knowing her for such a brief time.

"I guess this isn't the time to complain. Let's get this done right away."

*

And then a little less than an hour later—

"Now that was dramatic. I bet it'll be the top news of the night."

"I thought you were rushing us… How much of that did you plan to happen, Boss?"

"That wasn't planned. It's just, among closed communities for middle and high schoolers, there were some rather nasty rumors."

"This is worse than sugar daddy stuff. This isn't something to let a minor see. It's traumatizing."

"And I do apologize for that. But well, there were rumors but no proof and signs of searching the community for victims. That's why I was pushing you a little to hurry…" Narasaki casually laughed over the phone. *"It's a home run. You're a lucky boy, Reiji."*

"That doesn't make me happy. At all."

The *weeoo* of sirens. Police and firefighters had come to the high-rise apartment, which had become the scene of a crime. They were escorting out a man in a jacket, mass-media drones buzzing around them.

It was night, and the sun had fully set. The emergency crew was consoling a crying girl, and the arrested man was being shoved into the police vehicle right in front of the drones, his face concealed as he was taken away.

"Please put yourself in my shoes," said Reiji. "As soon as I turned to mist and sneaked in, I ran into an attempted drugging and rape of a junior high girl."

"That's an experience that's hard to come by. Was it interesting?"

"It was awful."

A dark room. A middle school girl in her uniform, drugged and passed out. A man breathing heavily as he took off her blouse.

Get rid of the makeup and remove the digital corrections, and he was no fashionable and handsome streamer—just a slovenly middle-aged man. Reiji had called the cops on him without hesitation. Now he listened to the murmurs and commentary of onlookers.

"Upon entering, suspect Kuraiyami Darkness, aka Yamahiko Yamamoto, age forty-two, was fully naked—"

"He won't be able to talk his way out of this one. They found his pants and underwear under the bed, but the victim's school ID was in his pocket… Yes, mm-hmm, it's a habit for him."

"He infiltrated accounts he got from complicit minors and went into age-gated communities that weren't well-policed. After arranging to meet the girls and assaulting them, he would use the videos to keep them from talking…"

"He got careless—perhaps because he was so used to it from

repeated offenses. He burned so many heat pheromones that the sprinklers malfunctioned, and even the illegal smartphone with evidence in it was lying in the living room."

"…Yes, that's right. The media reaction is… Yes, please…"

Rubberneckers had gathered around the apartment building.

Nonchalantly losing himself among them, Reiji turned one ear into mist and slid it along the ground.

He listened in on a detective calling to make a report by a police vehicle.

This method of eavesdropping was pretty old-school, so there was no way he would be found out.

"An uproar on public social media? I don't care. That part isn't police business."

"Y-yes, sir… Understood. Well then… Agh, drop dead, pedo scum!" the detective spat, hanging up the call with his boss.

Giving the vehicle with the suspect in it a dirty glare, he squared his shoulders and got into the car.

After watching all this, Reiji drew back the ear that he'd sent. Losing himself in the darkness of night and the hustle and bustle around him, his abilities gathered no attention and left no traces as he departed.

"Very nasty. You're the one who saw to it that the evidence would go to the police, though?"

"Since it'd be a hassle if he talked his way out of it."

Reiji had pushed the pants the man had removed under the bed and had also hidden the school ID.

Having been caught in the act, Kuraiyami Darkness would have no way to get away, and the police would have official records of a half-naked adult man and a middle school girl. At this point, he wouldn't be able to escape conviction, even with the best of lawyers.

"He'd been hiding his crimes to some extent using his wits and money, but since the information had already leaked—even if it was all rumors—it was only a matter of time until it was discovered. Even without our intervention, he would have been caught eventually,

right?

"Probably. But…" In the darkness, Reiji followed the flashing lights with his eyes.

The ambulance with the victim would be headed for the hospital, guided by the police.

When he thought about the girl who had been assaulted—

"Boss… It's fine that the sex pest is getting canceled, but can't we protect the victim?"

"I believe that her name won't be publicly reported since she's a minor. Apparently, she ran away from home."

With nowhere to go, she had needed to rely on a friend in a closed community, only to wind up as a victim of a sexual predator—what a tragic story.

"I don't think that I can stop her being a victim of sexual crimes based on looking at her private history. In the outside world, I'm just a small business owner. There's nothing I can do."

"…"

All a monster could do was to kill other monsters.

The only ones who could heal wounds would be other humans, those who could be there when someone was suffering.

"So what about the proof he was connected to the illegal Tonic? I'm not paying you to expose the man for sex crimes."

"There was nothing that seemed to suggest he had anything to do with the Tonic. And the police confiscated his phone and his computer…"

"Okay. I'll request that BT head office investigates that and pulls strings with our police channels. On to the next!"

"…What's happened to Getsu and Kakiba? I haven't heard from them."

"Oh, they've been enjoying their own delightful little situation…"

*

“Are you listening? I’m just a normal guy, you know. It hurts when people bash me on the internet, you know? It makes me think, ‘Wow, I’d like to kill them.’ You understand that feeling?”

“No, I don’t, man…”

“Yeah, of course you wouldn’t get it! Ahhh, I knew the world wouldn’t understand me! The world just isn’t at the level to be able to understand how funny I am!”

“…What do we do, Agent Inka Cola? This guy is so obnoxious.”

“Yeah, I know! …But like, can’t you come a little closer to us to talk?!”

“Hey, are you listening?! Can I call you Getsu? I’d like to know what sort of jokes young people enjoy these days! Let’s open up and talk about our dreams. We’re friends, right?!”

“We just met less than three minutes ago, dude!”

In a diner at the station close to the old town area of the city in the capitol of Kyoto, a middle-aged man occupied a table seat, rambling on while enjoying the bar that evening. His clothing stank.

He must have been bad at laundry, as he smelled a little damp. The customers around him cringed and went on their phones.

A faint AI voice sounded from the man’s pocket. Someone had reported him on public social media, and he’d been identified via facial recognition using the security cameras in the restaurant. The report came along with a chain of warning messages.

Citizen registration number XXXXXX, unemployed. Takuya Kidomura.

Public harassment: Warning. Credit score: 3.

In the case of cumulative offenses, credit information will be affected, digital payment limits lowered, and participation privileges in public services will be limited. Betterment required. I repeat, warning—

“Whoops, that’s no good. Sorry it’s so loud!” He was unbothered about receiving what would be a lethal warning in modern society.

Putting away his phone, he cheerily pestered the yellow-haired boy.

"I don't think that's the problem here, though… Uh, seriously…" Getsu Raisan was at a complete loss as the plump middle-aged man wrapped an arm around his shoulders, a twinkle in his eye as he spoke of his dreams. Kei Kakiba was wearing some sunglasses as a rather forced disguise, whispering to Getsu from a seat behind him at another table.

The atmosphere in the family restaurant was hellish. As the customers were whispering in annoyance and giving them cold stares, Kei Kakiba was tapping away on the ordering tablet, pretending she had nothing to do with this and thinking back on how they'd gotten here.

"We planned to observe him…but I never expected he would come bother us instead."

…After finishing her conversation with Agent Ditchwater, aka Reiji —

Kei and Getsu had staked out a certain house in the old town part of the city.

"He does look like he's rich, but…," said Getsu.

"If he owns this much land in the city, then he must be, right?" Kei asked.

So both of them figured. In developed areas, even if it was in a less desirable part of the city, owning a detached house took quite a bit of money. However, the man's place was not well-maintained, and the yard was filled with weeds.

In front of the entrance was a mountain of garbage bags that hadn't been disposed of. It seemed like it was one of those hoarding situations.

A few minutes after ending the phone call with Reiji, without much wait, the door opened, and a middle-aged man emerged—matching the photo Narasaki's secretary Neru had given them. He was suspected of winning the Phantasm Tonic, the self-styled comedian *Pika☆Run.*

"…He looks like a weird guy—actually, pretty sketchy…"

"I agree. He looks like if he came to the bar, he'd be one of *those* of the highest order."

But they couldn't just leave him be.

Thinking of following him to start off, they left the station area and entered a diner.

They followed him and sat in the seats behind him, and as they were waiting for their orders, he took out a paper notepad and pencil.

"That's not it… Come on, inspiration… Funny material, material, hmm…," he worried to himself particularly loudly. They could hear everything, even at the table behind him.

"Looks like he's brainstorming. I remember he was supposed to be a comedian…?" said Kei.

"Seems that way," Getsu replied. "Oh yeah, so what's his humor like?"

"We should be able to get the gist of it on video sites… How about we take a look?"

"Huh? But wouldn't the sound give us away? He's right there."

"I have some wireless earbuds. Here, take one."

They connected to a video site with Kei's phone. With a quick search, they discovered the relevant channel.

There weren't many views but piles of negative comments.

That alone made them not want to watch, but the two of them shared the wireless earbuds.

"It's not hard to see? Raisan, could you hold the phone for me?"

"Ah, sure. Let's just go with the newest one…"

Holding Kei's phone so they could watch together, Getsu played the video.

"Special Skill: Poop! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

"…I shouldn't have opened it…"

"No question about that. It's awful."

Did that count as a skill? *No, it clearly did not*, both of them

thought.

Of course their sense of humor wasn't such that they'd find this funny. According to the comments, this gag was technically based on a joke from an old internet post, but it was so crass that it was unbearable to listen to. On top of that, the guy was very good at making crude noises.

Even with basically the entire video covered in censorship sounds, the beginnings and endings of the noises alone were incredibly uncomfortable to listen to.

"…Let's pretend we didn't see that."

"Yeah. We didn't see anything. I wanna wipe that from my memory…"

Just then, when they were about to close the video—

"Hey, hey, you two. Is that my video? Wow, you were watching it? Hello, I'm *Pika☆Run!* Thanks for liking and subscribing!!!"

"Ack?!"

——The man himself spotted them.

"…I never imagined I'd be suddenly standing at the bar."

"You can't be like that after you sold me out at the drop of a hat! Help, this guy's so close!"

"I'm sorry. That's the one thing I won't do… I physically can't do it. Good luck!"

"Y-you're so mean…!"

Basically, right as Kei and Getsu were being grossed out by the aforementioned video—

Pika☆Run, feeling uninspired, got up from his seat and just so happened to see himself on Getsu's phone.

A normal person would have hesitated here, but he had no tact and charged on in.

"How cute! You're like a model! Are you also a fan? My fan?! I'm so glad! Could it be I'm a fad?! Are high school girls into me now?! Yahoo, it's my time!!!"

The moment he approached with particular intensity, Kei quietly

got up from her seat. "…No, he's the fan. How nice that you got to meet the man himself. What a coincidence."

"Huh?! Hey! Kei!!!"

"I'm in the way, so I'll leave," she said. "Talk all you like."

As Getsu was left there all alone, dumbfounded, Kei quickly switched to a different table.

"Huh?! You don't have to hold back, so don't be shy! But you've got a nice sense of humor, getting my jokes… You pass! Your humor passes!"

"Ah…ah-ha-ha-ha-ha… Yeah." Then he whispered to Kei, "I'll remember this."

"Tee-hee-hee-hee…" Apologetically, she whispered back, "I'm sorry. I really can't. Please do your best."

For about three minutes straight after that—

The self-styled comedian did not let up, blasting Getsu Raisan with a machine gun of words from point-blank range as he wrapped an arm around the boy's shoulder. Mentally, the werewolf was on the verge of death.

I was already feeling crappy…but now I actually wanna puke.

Having taken his Human Tonic to prevent the monthly madness, he was continuing to feel unwell.

Morning and the daytime were particularly bad. He got better starting around twilight when the sun was mostly down. It was ironic, but once it was nighttime, his werewolf mysticality would activate and ease the illness caused by the Human Tonic.

But he couldn't use feeling sick as an excuse.

He had to prove his usefulness—or he could be disposed of at any time.

"…Um. Pardon me, Mr. *Pika☆Run.* Is your humor deliberate?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

They were so close that Getsu could clearly see the nose hairs sticking out of the man's nostrils.

Restraining his extreme discomfort in order to keep the conversation going, Getsu asked the first thing to come to mind. "Like that joke before. More people dislike it than find it funny, right?

And people actually do bash you in the comment section, so I was wondering if you're doing it deliberately."

"Ohhhhhhhh. Yes, you really do understand me. Leave it to a fan to have a good eye."

"Ha, ha-ha-ha-ha…"

"I actually am. When I was a kid, everyone was more of an idiot, you know? When me and my guy friends got together, we said so much stupid stuff, going on about shit and dicks all over the place."

"…That was sure an era, all right…"

If you tried to do that now, someone would instantly report you for harassment.

For minors, that meant decreasing their parents' credit scores, while adults would receive direct warnings.

"Ha, my credit score? I don't care about that. I only pay with cash. Though I deal with a lot of hassle, I don't care about not being able to get a loan or use a credit card."

"Uh, but if you smell, that just bothers people. Also, you're loud and too close…"

"Hmm, I guess. But well, those are quirks, right?"

He had no doubts about what he believed was right.

With sparkling eyes, the middle-aged man whispered into Getsu's ear, making goosebumps rise on his skin. "Yeeep…!"

"It sucks how uptight everyone is these days, right? I just wanna pop some air holes in the culture! Ahhh! Like rebelling against the times? You get my taste…and how I'm just too far on the cutting edge."

"…Y-yeah, that's right. But isn't that a little dangerous…?"

If this obnoxious man were the winner of the bid—

Then his motivation to try to get the Phantasm Tonic would most likely be…

"I was wondering if the comments make you mad. I was worried…"

"Of course I get mad. I get pissed off, and sometimes, I wish everyone would drop dead. I have my moments of thinking everyone who doesn't understand my art should just disappear. In fact, I did think about doing it for real."

"…Huh, are you…serious?!"

No way. We actually got it? Getsu thought, forgetting his irritation to examine the man's face.

"Maybe it's too early to be telling a minor. But there's an underground world out there, you know. I have a lot of life experience, so I've got a lot of clout in that world, too. And I found one. A black auction."

A chill ran down Getsu's spine as the man whispered in his ear.

Not because the man was creepy but because what he was saying was so dangerous.

As Getsu was gulping, waiting for him to continue, *Pika☆Run* must have been glad to have the attention of his listener, as he was grinning ear-to-ear as he lowered his voice. "You can't fool an adult like me. Come on. You know the times when the internet was underground? Back when stupid stuff would make your browser crash and flame wars were normal on social media? So I'm not gonna be fooled by that kind of fraud. Because I can tell that a lie is a lie."

"Fraud…?"

"Fraud, fraud. I mean, look, you're not using common sense. That black auction was all like, 'We've got this real amazing Tonic that can grant you superpowers.'"

"…When you put it that way, it does feel pretty lame."

"Exactly. Lame. Everyone just joined in, bidding huge amounts like idiots. Of course I canceled. A hundred twenty million winning bid, who'd pay that?"

"I—I see…"

"And besides, I have money, but my credit is trash, so I couldn't have paid it anyway. Ah-ha-ha-ha, well, it's a joke, a joke. I was thinking I'd turn it into material for a video sometime. ☆"

The internet of bygone days. Just like old times—

So the man said with an incredibly self-satisfied look.

About an hour later.

The self-styled comedian insisted on paying his bill, saying, "I'll treat you. Let me treat you."

After earnestly listening to his obnoxious prattling, Getsu was finally free.

*

"…Well, that was a disaster," said Reiji.

"It was bad," Getsu groaned. "…I'm totally beat, for real. You ran out on me, Kei…"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I tried, but I can't deal with that kind of work if I'm not getting paid."

"Isn't it fine if he buys your food? You profited," said Reiji.

"I at least wanted to eat something. But I felt so bad, I couldn't swallow a thing. Dammit…!"

Due to infection control regulations, it was basically forbidden for restaurants to operate late at night.

Outside of a limited area with special privileges—in other words, the Masquerade—eateries were closed between seven PM and eight AM. The only other places that were allowed to operate between those hours were convenience stores, and even now, a few customers had come as if invited by its glow, walking between the shelves while social distancing.

They were in the old town in front of a convenience store by the station.

With hot snacks they'd just bought inside in hand, Reiji, Getsu, and Kei were talking about what they had done, finally free of their investigation.

"But…a prank bid on an illegal site? That guy takes some risks," said Reiji.

"I think he just has no sense of danger," said Getsu. "He was saying, 'I use a proxy service, so I'm fine. I'm a pro.'"

"Completely reckless… I don't know if he's lucky or unlucky."

As Reiji was drinking warm tea from a plastic bottle, Kei, standing beside him, said, "Is he in danger, after all? Will something happen

to him if he can't pay?"

"It will. I think he won't be killed if he pays, though."

In this ultra-controlled society, illegal sites and the deep web were managed very harshly—though this was just hearsay from Neru.

It clearly wasn't worth it to find a point of contact through which you could buy access rights, then pay tons of money and make the effort to connect to the service just for a prank bid. Most people wouldn't do such a thing.

"You never know where the information might leak, just like how Neru found out about it. If that man won and couldn't pay, he would be receiving quite the penalty for it," said Reiji.

Kei's expression darkened at that ominous term. "A penalty?"

Handsome brow furrowing, Reiji continued. "If he just has collectors forcing him to pay, that'll be a miracle. Worst case, he'd be erased."

"On the outside? They can do that?"

"When you're dealing with these people, yes. Once you connect to the deep web, your information is leaked, and it's not like there's no kidnapping or violence in the outside world in the blind spots of security cameras."

There was far less crime on the outside than in the lawless district of the Masquerade, and the arrest rate was extremely high, but still.

Of course it was also possible that the comedian would be okay, but it seemed foolish to do something so pointlessly risky.

"…But that's his own choice. There's no need for us to butt in," said Reiji.

"It looks like he couldn't win, so he's not in trouble anyway," said Getsu.

"Warn him indirectly that it would be dangerous for him to do that again. You have his contact info, right?"

"…Getting in touch with the guy would be pretty exhausting, though… I'm so sick…" Getsu seemed like he seriously didn't want to do it.

While his encounter with the utterly obnoxious man had been

brief, it appeared that entertaining him had wounded the boy's heart.

"But anyway," Getsu continued, "between that pedo bastard that you caught, Reiji, and the annoying comedian…that's two of our suspects down. What should we do now?"

"If we're going by process of elimination, investigate the last one. I guess the first-year at our school won the bid."

A high school student connecting to the deep web and dumping a large amount of money on a dubious Tonic—

Normally, it would seem straight-up impossible.

"The hit-and-run centaur was also a minor," Reiji pointed out. "We can't let our guards down." Eliminating his presumption that a minor couldn't possibly be behind this, he stayed as suspicious as he could.

"If he is the culprit, then isn't Mei in danger?" Kei pointed out.

"It's possible, but she was just planning to gather gossip on him at school." Reiji hardly thought that Mei was foolish enough to press the boy himself.

She had been attacked once, so she would know quite well how terrifying Mythic Tonic and Phantasm Tonic could be.

"I doubt that she'll do anything thoughtless, but it would be best to check," said Reiji.

"So then I'll do it," said Kei. "I'll send her a message on the app."

"…Damn you, conveniences of civilization. I haven't done anything, but I feel like I'm losing."

The very old cell phones the Specials were allowed didn't have such functionality.

Kei pulled out her smartphone and briskly tapped away. When she opened her messaging app—

"Huh, so that's how they are… Looks convenient," said Reiji.

"Not at all. There's a class chatroom and stuff, but I'm not in it."

"Just asking here, but isn't that because you've been excluded?"

"I don't like getting notifications for casual chats. It makes me jump."

"…Maybe it's not that you're being excluded, but that you're a loner…"

"Just call yourself independent, and you can fool yourself and

others. I recommend it.”

A resilient loner. But he didn’t get the sense that Kei was saying it out of sour grapes. She was being sincere.

Perhaps it was less like she had no friends and more like she had no interest in people she didn’t know. The way she would get weirdly attached to people and get involved with them once she’d gotten to know them made her rather like a cat who did as it pleased.

“When I get a smartphone one day, I’ll install this app and add you.”

“Yeah, Kei,” Getsu said. “It’s looking bad for you—your social life is worse than ours.”

“Huh, I feel like I heard a very rude comment just now… Anyway, I’ll contact her.”

She selected **Mei** in English characters—Mei Mezuki’s username in the contact info she had given Kei before.

Unlike with public social media, you were allowed to change your name on apps. Since it was tied to your personal information, there was no point to it, but many users changed their names on a whim.

Kei: Got a minute, Mei?

Kei: The two that we investigated weren’t it

Kei: So the third one you have might be the guy.

The messages sent with a popping noise each time.

Kei: Are you okay? Everyone’s worried

Kei added a stamp of a worried anime character at the end. After less than two minutes of waiting— Her messages were confirmed as read, and she received an answer in reply.

Mei: #Freethebeast

——A hashtag that she didn’t understand.

*

Not long before Kei Kakiba messaged Mei Mezuki.

In this modern, ultra-controlled society where social media was regulated and censored—

Messaging apps where you could talk to your friends and family without third parties watching were even more valuable.

For example, a class at school. Or a group of friends. Or a boy and girl who just started dating.

It was through shared friends that communities were connected, like chains linked together.

From one friend to another. From a friend to a girlfriend. From a girlfriend to family. From family to a relative. To a friend of that relative. From a friend to a friend. From a friend to a close associate. From that associate to an acquaintance. And then from an acquaintance to a friend.

The apps bridged every relationship, encompassing all sorts of connections.

Conversations that you couldn’t have on public social media, which had lost anonymity—

Backbiting, slander, rumors. Sounding out the very edges of what might be going too far and get you reported, deepening friendships by becoming minor accomplices—this was the vent hole that was allowed to young people born in an era of blockades.

——**Group Chat [Akanebara Municipal Track Team (18)]**

Mei: Sup

Mach: Huh, Mei?!

Mei: It’s just you right now?

Mach: Club’s over, so they’ll be here soon

Mach: And like, it's totally rare for you to come. Screenshot, screenshot

Mei: I don't care

Mei: I mean it's so slow, I hate it, typing is annoying and I wanna talk

Mach: That's so you

While looking at the group chat where her club friends gathered…

"Welcome back. Do you need support?"

"Thanks… I'm getting changed. Help me."

Her automatic home care robot, operated by AI via the internet, activated on voice command. *"Understood."*

This expensive product was not humanoid but a stable cylinder, like a bowling pin with mechanical-looking arms. She gave it her uniform top, and as she was taking off her sweaty shirt and changing into more comfortable clothing, she operated the touch panel with a frown.

Mei: I wanted to ask something.

Mei: Do you know a first-year named Kitajima?

Mach: Umm

Mach: Kitajima who? There are a few.

Mei: Yuuichi

Mach: He's in my class!

"Whoa, what a coincidence. For real?"

Mei's life had changed remarkably since getting a spinal injury that left her right leg paralyzed and becoming a wheelchair user.

Her home—on the upper floor of a high-class apartment in the city—had been thoroughly renovated, and it now had an entryway

without the traditional step upward for wheelchair access. She had also been given a robot that attended to her 24-7. Her meals were delivered regularly, and two times a week, a human home care aide would do chores that were difficult for a robot to do.

It cost money. A lot of it. But her mother, a career woman working at a major corporation, and her father, a venture capitalist, had spent it without hesitation, arranging a comfortable living environment for their daughter.

I am grateful.

Though it was asking for a lot.

But it's been two weeks since I last saw either of them.

She understood that they had to earn money. But both of her parents had clearly been returning home less frequently of late.

They moved around between work hotels in the area and apartments rented on weekly contracts, so she saw them even less than once a month. Even when they were together, it would be just her father or just her mother, never the three of them at once.

Her parents would never acknowledge it. But she understood the reason they stayed away from home.

They don't want to see me broken.

Their family had powerful ambitions to be part of the elite.

Her mother and father were successful people, and they had assumed the generation they'd given birth to would also be successful. They'd supported Mei as much as possible not only in her studies, but also in track, where she had displayed talent from an early age.

That was what had enabled Mei to unlock her abilities to their fullest potential. She had thought of herself as the fastest high school girl in Japan, and her objective times had in fact proven that.

Well, of course. They've cut losses on the ruins of a failed project. I'm just a nuisance.

The accident a year ago had changed everything.

An idiot who had been drinking in the Masquerade had turned off automatic driving while drunk and taken the wheel. They'd hit her at a crosswalk, injuring her spine and paralyzing her right leg. While she could still stand momentarily, walking or running was out of the

question.

The education her parents had invested so much in had all come to nothing.

They did love her—with all the money put into her lifestyle support, major deposits into her account, and a large balance on her credit card.

They had sympathy—every time they met, her parents would smile, hiding their suffering and smothering their sadness.

That was why Mei's parents arranged for her a life without want, fulfilling their duties, and then left.

The renovated home didn't feel very lived-in.

The plastic models that had been her father's hobby and the plushies that her mother had collected were nowhere to be found.

Even Mei herself didn't have much in the way of personal items. She had thrown out her trophies and certificates.

Once what she had invested all her heart and soul in was gone, the apartment became shockingly empty.

A showroom with no content. She was all alone in a space that feigned minimalism.

Compared to those guys, this is some pretty first-world stuff to be worried about, seriously.

They hadn't told her much about it. But the strange friends who she'd only met just recently—Reiji Kasumi, Getsu Raisan, and Kei Kakiba—were, in terms of worldly comforts, incomparably less fortunate than her.

They were Beasts who hadn't been properly treated like humans ever since they were born, and a working student who had grown up in an orphanage. Then there was Mei, who had been living a happy life until only just recently, taking a tumble into sudden misfortune.

The scales were shockingly unbalanced, and Mei laughed them off.

How stupid. It doesn't matter. It's idiotic to compare that sort of thing.

She thought it was pointless to compare yourself to someone else and wonder who was worse off.

Your own suffering was your own. Even if someone else saw it as stupid, your struggle was your struggle, and even if something looked painful to someone else if you were having fun, then it was fun—that was how she felt.

That was why she struggled and fought.

To search for a new identity. To search for something she could be proud of. Having lost the simple pillar of being fast, Mei Mezuki was searching for something she could point to and cry out, "This is me."

I have to do this.

For herself.

The hit-and-run centaur had been an idiot, running down and murdering strangers out of selfish logic.

I can't put what she started to rest like this…!

In order to move on, to put the past behind her—

—she had to make sure to settle things with the string-puller, the one who'd started this whole mess.

Then I can move on.

Revenge, retribution, retaliating, getting them back. Just that alone might be meaningless.

But it would be a weight off her shoulders. That was why she'd given all that money to those suspicious cleaners and was even working herself. That was why she could bear with the wounds of the past and keep in contact with old friends, even though it hurt.

Mei: So, Kitajima. What's he like?

Mach: Normal.

Mei: Be a little more specific.

Mach: It seems like he's trying too hard.

Mei: What do you mean?

Mach: He has a lot of friends he hangs out with

Mach: and he treats them all to karaoke or orders pizza for everyone at lunch.

Mach: Stuff like that.

Mei: Not like I know much about it

Mei: but karaoke rooms are limited to three people to prevent contagion, aren't they?

Mach: Yeah, like…

Mach: He apparently goes to places where they don't have those restrictions.

The indirect implication was that he frequented a playground with no restrictions at all: the Masquerade.

If he goes there regularly, then that means…

It wouldn't be strange for him to have some point of contact with the underground.

Frankly, "dark auction" seemed like a fictional term, like it couldn't be real, but he was suspected of making a winning bid.

Mei's suspicions toward her junior—whose face she didn't even know—intensified.

Mei: That's gotta be crazy expensive. He treats them for everything?

Mach: So I hear.

Mach: It's like he's trying hard to be popular

Mach: like he's going out so he can upload group photos on social media.

Mach: He's invited me a few times, but I haven't gone.

Mei: Hey, don't hold back on my account

Mach: No, I just really don't wanna go.

That makes sense, she thought.

Mei, the star of the track team, broke her back in the Masquerade, and another of their members had died there, though it

hadn’t been made public.

Not many people would be fine with going out into the very place that had caused such a situation.

——*Bzzz…!*

“Huh?”

Her phone suddenly vibrated.

A notification popped up over the chat screen she’d had open.

Multiple followers of hers had shared a certain message posted to public social media and were spreading it.

If that were all, it would be nothing unusual, a regular occurrence. Followers were incorporated practically by force, like your classmates and teachers at high school, friends from your old middle and elementary schools, or families and relatives.

It was common to get a notification when someone said something rather witty, and it went mildly viral.

“Yuuichi …Kitajima.”

It was the very person who she’d just been looking into, the one suspected of winning the dark auction.

A first-year at Akanebara Municipal High School, his icon was a selfie, a face with no distinguishing characteristics.

His latest post was one second ago.

——View count: 100. 1,000. 10,000. 100,000. 1,000,000…and more and more.

It went up and up and kept climbing.

“This is going crazy viral…but there’s no way this post could be that popular, could it?”

#freethebeast

Displayed on the social media page was a bland icon of his smiling face and a mysterious hashtag.

There was nothing profound, funny, or witty about the post that would make it go viral. It was boring.

#sickofit #letsbefree #destroy #gather #inthatplace!

A string of tags. The messages came beneath the initial post one

after another.

All of them went viral just like the first, again and again, sweeping the trending list.

"What the heck…? I don't get it."

Even Mei, who didn't know much about trends, could tell that this was strange.

In the first place, everyone knew that public social media was censored and monitored. *"Free the beast"* was basically like instigating the use of Monster Tonic in the Masquerade. And then the violent remarks that followed— It was a rebellious incitement against this closed-off, fully-monitored society.

Normally, AI would react the moment such things were posted, freeze the account, delete the content, and warn the user, ordering care like counseling. But in the few minutes Mei had been watching, the posts continued.

They didn't stop. They didn't come to an end. They kept going. Increasing. Spreading.

The hashtag was disseminating.

"…Creepy!!!"

She got the chills, as though someone had licked from the back of her neck down her spine.

She exited social media and opened the chat screen on the messaging app that had been running in the background. When she did, she found a string of sixteen unread messages.

Track Club Marui Jr:	**#freethebeast**
IkiM:	**#freethebeast**
Naruko:	**#freethebeast**
Oono@AkanebaraTrack:	**#freethebeast**
Pipi:	**#freethebeast**
Geko@Pirates:	**#freethebeast**

Moriya:	**#freethebeast**
Wataaa:	**#freethebeast**
Main:	**#freethebeast**
Bakoyashi:	**#freethebeast**
Golden:	**#freethebeast**
Mambo No.5:	**#freethebeast**
Intellect:	**#freethebeast**
Akiko:	**#freethebeast**
Mikimiki:	**#freethebeast**
Mach:	**#freethebeast**

"Yeeep?!"

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!!!

Her smartphone buzzed, buzzed, and buzzed some more. Vibrating and vibrating, the notifications came.

All her friends from the track team were sending the same message in the app. And that wasn't all. New chatrooms were opening one after another. The title on all of them was **#freethebeast**— Chatrooms with the same name opened up, sending invitations to every account she knew.

All her registered friends.

All the contacts she had registered in her phone, people she was connected to IRL.

They featured those words and those words alone.

——#freethebeast

The same exact hashtag.

Over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over…!

"What the hell? What the hell is going on?!"

Creepy.

It was weirdly uncomfortable, like the phone she was so used to using was filled with insect eggs.

She couldn't understand it. She immediately tried to close the window. She swiped the screen. Chat rooms opened, and messages were sent to all of her contacts.

Mei: #freethebeast

"Huh?"

It had sent the hashtag for some reason, without her being aware of it.

Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz, bzzz… Her phone vibrated. Notifications came in reaction to the messages.

New messages in the messaging app—crazy numbers of them. It would be absurd to try to count.

Because of that, she didn't notice a particular message lost among them—the one from Kei Kakiba.

They were sent to her family. To her parents. To her relatives. Even to places where social media didn't reach. They connected via the app and invited them to social media, and the hashtag proliferated instantaneously. Spreading. Propagating. She felt it.

"What the hell…? What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?!"

Something felt wrong. She shivered. On reflex, she threw her phone against the wall.

The LCD screen broke with a *crack*. The screen flickered. She felt itchy. Itchy. Her head was itchy. In her hair, deep inside her skull and eye sockets, something like bugs were skittering around.

She could feel them moving around. It was squishy. Her brain just felt so gross. And that thing.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

"Zo grozz! Zo grozz! My head…is breaking…!"

Just like a big chocolate bar snapping in two.

It was the watching eyes that created this disgusting feeling in her heart, this disgusting ache in her head.

Her back trembled. Her whole body spasmed. Sounds came out of her twitching throat. Just like a broken doll that had gone out of

control, Mei continued to writhe in her wheelchair, arms around herself, while the AI standing beside her emitted a warning.

"Vital signs in dangerous ranges. Should I call emergency services?"

"#No."

The word came out funny.

It was like static, like scratching glass, a sound that the human throat didn't seem like it could produce.

But Mei wasn't surprised. It was as if she expected that sound.

"Understood. Do you need support?"

"#Imgoingout. #Helpme."

She stripped off her sweaty indoor clothes.

*

On the same day, at the same time.

In the president's office of the Fantastic Sweeper building—

"Oh, we've got a rather dangerous one here. What do we do about this?"

"Not the time to be acting dumb. This is dangerous. Super-duper dangerous," the secretary Neru said, tension apparent on her cool face.

Putting his feet up on his cluttered desk, the company president leaned his chair back as far as it would go and gazed up at the ceiling. "But it's not like we can do anything. I leave all the gadget business to you."

"Scum… Nothing I can do. It's hopeless."

The timeline kept scrolling on and on. Official social media was flying away at a speed never seen before.

It was a huge burden on the server, making it slow to run. But the server never crashed, a single hashtag endlessly sending itself to

every corner of social media—what you might call the core of information.

"About fifty thousand people per second are posting the same thing," said Neru.

#freethebeast.

They were crying out at this very moment.

"It's amazing indeed, like an anime movie broadcast on terrestrial television. Par…farce, was it?" The president was mixing up parody and French farce comedy.

The secretary glared at him. "Not the time for laughing. This isn't funny."

"It's still running, isn't it? But it can't and won't be stopped."

The servers should have long since crashed from the burden, but they continued to run.

The posts of the account that had started it, the one belonging to Yuuichi Kitajima, were already buried, but the incredible spread of the hashtag had ensured it was trending, fixed atop the timeline.

"We can't even erase it. Those who run these sites will either be pale as sheets or… No, they can't do a thing. If they try to work on stopping it, they'll see the hashtag, and then they'll be infected."

"Infected? …What do you mean?"

"This information is infectious. An epidemic that eats into people through their vision. A bug in a digital society."

What Narasaki was describing was actually—

"The most disastrous of all the Phantasms that Beast Tech has ever captured, one with a threat level of red. The kind that will doom humanity if left alone, a monster that should be contained and isolated at all costs."

The extract of that very Phantasm was the source of this paranormal phenomenon.

"It was on the list we received from a connection of ours at head office. The *Viral Smartphone* Phantasm."

"…Sounds pretty weak. And lame."

Narasaki cackled at his secretary's impression. "Right, I get that. Actually, this *is* the weakest of Phantasms. If you take the Tonic and manifest it, it doesn't make you any stronger. You just get a root of

flesh that connects to your smartphone, fusing with it. Whether it's on their right or left depends on the person," he added. "And it's no stronger than a phone, either. Forget about punches. If you drop it, it'll break."

"And its abilities… Are they just those of a smartphone?"

"That's right. It just creates virality and nothing else. If you use the viral smartphone, your social media, video sites, everything will go viral and spread at an unbelievable rate."

There weren't even any limits to its reception.

Even if you were at the South Pole or the bottom of the ocean, you would connect to the internet and get a signal.

"When the old era came to an end, and the curtain rose on a new one, people acquired social media, aggravating their desire for popularity. This is the extreme of mysticality brought about by such feelings."

The documents Narasaki spread out on his desk detailed the viral smartphone's discovery and containment.

One day, a special signal was discovered in networks at Beast Tech headquarters and all over the world. Some insignificant streamer posted a single short-form video gag.

"And then it went viral. Overnight, a famous foreign actress spread it, leading to about a billion people seeing that video in just a few hours."

"…You're saying that was the work of a Phantasm?"

"It seems so. By the way, the gag was about apples and pineapples being a pen."

"I don't get it."

"Right? Well, the content doesn't matter. It just goes viral and throws cognition out of kilter. That's what the viral smartphone Phantasm does, and that's the reason that the first person to contract it saved the world."

The man to go viral had been an unpopular comedian.

He had just gotten spread around and became famous. He'd been happy about it, and that was the end of it.

Beast Tech learned about the abnormality through a social media management company and made contact with him. After collecting

his phone and looking for signs of mysticality, they prayed out of deep relief.

"They all thanked God… The initial person to contract the Phantasm had wanted to go viral, but nothing more. It was, in a sense, a pure desire to become famous."

The man had been secured and contained without him unleashing the Phantasm.

"Somehow, Beast Tech's technology department managed to remove the Phantasm by going all in on surgery. Basically, they just cut off his whole right hand, which was attached to his phone, and stuck on a new one. Honestly, it doesn't sound too difficult."

"…That's pretty nasty."

"It's pretty reasonable in this field. Well, that's only because erasing someone who had gone that viral would be too expensive. They don't care about human life or human rights."

With a sunny smile, Narasaki got back to the point. "The essence of a viral smartphone is its ability to spread. It shares the will of the poster through social media, making their cognition infectious. A disease of cognition that infects visually with no cure—this is the extinction type."

Just by seeing the lines of posted text, the will of the poster would infect you.

The copied cognition would overwrite that of its victims.

So what were the feelings imbued in #freethebeast?

"A dissatisfaction with a locked-down world, a completely controlled society. An intense desire for recognition and destruction… Something like that, I suppose. When you get down to it, the moment they see this, all the citizens will become latent criminals, just like the poster."

"…Isn't that really dangerous?"

"It is. Well, it's not as if there's no hope."

Yes, for even in the event all of humanity became latent criminals —

"Older monsters—Mythic Beasts—aren't affected by Phantasms. That is to say, our employees are immune to the hashtag and will not be infected. Plus, we're not all the type to be so quick to act that

we would instantly do something, even if we were infected. Even if our cognition was distorted, it's not like our powers of judgment would be."

Even if the emotions of the original poster were conferred on them, that wouldn't necessarily motivate them to commit a crime.

Crime wasn't good. If the infected people had something to lose—family, friends, work, a lover, anything would do—they wouldn't do something to risk it. Their social nature would bind them, just barely holding them back from giving in to their destructive impulses.

"We should have a few hours before the chains of reason break and the infected wind up as Phantasms. If we secure the source—the viral smartphone—in the meantime, then we should be able to stop it."

"That's a surprisingly long time. Will it be enough?"

"The more someone values what they have, the more they'll resist. Put another way, people who have no attachment to the world, those with weak chains of reason and social ties, will easily become Phantasms."

For example, those who had already done wrong.

Those who had already committed crimes in this ultra-controlled society and had been branded with digital tattoos that would never go away: social outcasts, gangsters, dropouts, the dregs of society.

"People with strong dissatisfaction with the system who also have nothing to lose. Someone who had nearly written off society to begin with and who seeks revolution. And the young generation, with little social experience, who easily give into despair.

"Basically, nuisances who were a problem to begin with."

"So does that mean… You know?"

"What do you mean?"

Secretary Neru was pointing at the window of the president's office. Below was the nighttime cityscape from Otaku Road to the station area.

On the other side of the street, blossoming like an iron flower, was the Natsukibara head office of the supermassive enterprise Beast Teach.

At the entrance of the Masquerade, what could be called its

throat, near Natsukibara Station, were cries and screams—trouble.

Narasaki brought out an antique telescope and peered at the nighttime cityscape in an affected manner.

An image formed through the clear lens of the exquisitely carved relic from the Age of Exploration. It was—

"A riot at Natsukibara Station," said Neru. "A group of mostly young men and women who've taken Monster Tonic."

Students, most of them from Akanebara High School, had come out of the station.

Some were from other generations. But they were the minority. There were less than ten…thirty of them, still a small group. But they all had looks of ecstasy on their faces, ripping off their clothes without hesitation to become nude.

"I see. So they're freeing the beast…," said Narasaki.

There was the *pshhht* of escaping carbonation.

Then a *glug, glug, glug* down their throats.

The naked boys and girls, the students—

Throwing away their clothing, underwear, and phones, they all chugged Monster Tonic at once. The brand didn't matter—it was a mix.

Fur and scales covered human skin, and they howled.

The Beastpeople who gathered in this town all wore clothes and shoes. That was the proof that they were not just beasts—that they were human.

But this group had abandoned that, racing around like they had become total animals.

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

"What the hell?! You guys are naked! The hell are you doing—gyah?!"

"Th-the bastard just bit me! Stay back, stay back! Get the fuck away from me!!!"

As the confused Beastpeople were crying out and running around

in confusion—

An uncountable number of beasts simply howled—

"Panic at Natsukibara Station," said Neru. "Trains in all directions have stopped, it says."

"Well, the people who gather in this part of town are isolated, reception-wise," said Narasaki.

Therefore, the people who had originally been here would not have looked at social media and would not have turned into Phantasms.

Those who lived on the outside, however… The more they suppressed their dark sides and grew discontented, the more mad they would be driven.

"This is quite the mess. What do we do about this?" Narasaki asked in a devil-may-care manner as he peered down at the scene of disaster in the world below like a god enjoying himself.

What the beasts did after stripping off their clothes was all over the map. Some attacked food stalls and devoured uncooked meat to their heart's content, some sniffed at the crotches of other beasts and began copulating, and others must have taken the Beastpeople running around in a panic as prey, as they attacked them with drool dripping from their mouths.

Ring, ring, ring, ring!

"Whoops, that's the phone. Hello?"

"We are issuing an urgent order," came an AI voice without much inflection.

The moment Narasaki picked up the landline telephone on the desk and put it to his ear, his brow furrowed. "BT head office…either the security department or administration? Urgent sure doesn't sound good."

"Secrecy unnecessary. Please deal with the emergency…" Halfway through, it changed from a feminine AI voice to a real voice. *"Hurry and stop that riot!!!"* The call ended with that remark from the austere-sounding voice of a mature man.

“A section chief from head office, or maybe an executive? If it’s a direct order, they must really be serious about stopping it. As they should be. if they don’t do something, the destruction of humanity is very possible.”

“But, Boss…what do we do?”

The beasts let loose on the city were causing disorder as they scattered all over the place.

The trains had stopped, and the inbound trains to Natsukibara had been temporarily cut off. But if the infection spread, then the beasts would walk or drive, using whatever means they could to gather.

They would head to this district. To Natsukibara, the Masquerade.

In order to free their suppressed beasts.

“Indeed. For now, we inform our reliable staff about the situation —

“And perhaps we’ll have the one girl who could treat this Phantasmification via visual infection work for us?”

So said Narasaki, still carrying the receiver between his shoulder and neck—

Making *brrrr* rotating sounds with the old-fashioned rotary dial, he called a certain number.

*

It was just like she was dreaming.

Mei Mzuki rolled off the stopped train carriage onto the platform.

Her vision was hazy, as if she were seeing through a sheet of plastic wrap, with no real sense of reality as she looked down at herself. Her legs were still just sticks connected to her body; nothing had changed about them.

"Due to an emergency, the trains have ceased operation."

"Please do not leave the car or exit onto the platform. Stay where you are and wait," announced the management AI operating a drone with emergency lights. The confused people gathered around it like moths to a flame. They had come intending to have fun, but their plans had fallen through.

"…Tsk, what the hell? What's going on?"

"Did you see the hashtag on social media? It's kind of funny. I went and reposted it."

"I was planning to go drinking, though… Hey, you. You go take a look and see what's up."

"N-no way! I need to follow the drone's instructions, or my credit score will go down…!"

They were still anxious and dissatisfied, but they weren't able to immerse themselves entirely in unreality. Still with one foot in their ordinary lives, not a single one of them made to leave this platform, the halfway point between the extraordinary and the mundane.

In the middle of the buzzing crowd, like someone taking a breath to dive deep—

"…Hey, that girl."

"What a weird getup… But it's a little…"

Young men's gazes fell on Mei as she moved along the platform in her wheelchair, hands moving on the rims.

—#freethebeast—

The row of letters stuck in her brain, racing from her pelvis to her spine.

Though her head still felt hazy, her body was hot. It was just like before a race—like the moment she took her starting position on the track when she felt her body growing excited in spite of herself.

This…feels disturbing.

It was like she had two minds.

With her head cool and her body hot, the latter was clad in a bra top for running and shorts.

The outfit was something you'd never see outside of a sports context, and objectively, it was quite risqué. With help from the home aid robot, she had changed from her leisure wear into very out-of-place clothes. Then she had gotten in her wheelchair and come to the Masquerade as if led here.

In clothes that she was never supposed to have worn again.

She had gotten lots of glances in the train on the way here, too. Filthy looks. She didn't care. If they wanted to stare, she'd show them. She didn't even need these clothes. Yes. Go back to how things were. Forget everything.

Remove the invisible chains that tied you. Take the thing inside you, the screaming animal.

—#freethebeast—

"…#Free…"

There came a grating voice.

A noise like shattering glass that didn't seem at all like something the human throat could produce—a hashtag.

It couldn't be understood with logic. But she could understand that was what it was. The crowd on the platform had seen social media, and they had already been infected, but they must not have been affected so deeply that it would show in their words.

She swallowed. Her throat was dry. It was so, so, so dry, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She ached and ached and ached and ached. Her heart was thudding. She turned the handrims on her wheels. The crowds naturally parted, and she moved along the open way. She got into the elevator and came down off the platform into the station area.

There were rows of capsule-shaped locker rooms.

People would enter them, deposit their things, leave behind their phones, drink Monster Tonic, and give up their humanity to go out into town. To enjoy a temporary freedom permitted by the nation, a lawlessness like leftovers.

#Thefuture #whatIwanttodo #mydreams

#Forgeteverything #freethebeast …#no #thismakes #nosense

Leaving the murmuring crowds, Mei came over to a vending machine.

It was of accessible design, made so that even someone in a wheelchair could reach it. The machine stood at the entrance to the lawless district, sparkling as it advertised three types of drinks.

#Dontgivemethiscrap #I

Her phone. She was holding onto it since her uniform lacked pockets.

It was a little sweaty and damp as she took it and touched it to the vending machine. The order panel automatically completed payment. There was a metallic *thunk* as the canned beverage with a retro design rolled out—the miracle drug.

The one release in this ultra-controlled society: Monster Tonic.

There were three different flavors: Carnivore, Herbivore, and Reptiles and Amphibians. Mei picked out one with a cabbage logo on it and put the chilled can on her cheek.

#Itscold #itfeelsgood #screwthis #release #Idontcare #Iam #abeast…!!

Her skull strained and creaked.

She clenched her teeth, feeling the same tension and exertion she would the moment before a race.

On the left side of her face, the side she'd touched the chilled can to, there was an entranced smile.

But the right side, Mei's own half—

"#Stupidjunior #shedied #killed #willI #dothe #samething #forhim?

"#…no #noway #screwthis #screwthis #screwthis #screwthis … #screwthis!!"

Baring her fangs, she cried, howled, and struggled.

Like a cornered dog, she fought the temptation that filled half her head.

Her left hand gripped the can. Her right hand moved for the pull tab. She opened her mouth wide.

"#Ngkkkkk—!!!"

Like you would bite a spare rib.

She chomped down on her own wrist, digging in with her teeth and stopping her hand as it attempted to open the can.

#Notgonnalose #I #Im #notgonna #dowhatever #thatguy #says #!!

The hashtags had encroached upon her thoughts. But still, her jaw remained tight on her right arm.

Her healthy teeth sank deep into the flesh, and blood spilled out from the apparent toothmarks. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. She could feel her front teeth hitting bone, like dumplings on a skewer. The taste of blood and the flavor of iron flowed into her throat.

"…#Notyou!!"

Blood sprayed from the crisp bite marks onto her track uniform.

Her anger exploded. Yes, right now, her mind was being invaded. Something had been dumped into her head.

Rotten *impulses* from some loser. Despair? She wasn't despairing. *I haven't lost yet. I'm going to win. I'm going to win now. I'm still fighting right now. My legs won't move, and my junior died, but I'm still alive, and my arms work and so does my head. I can't run? Fine by me. I can do it. I can still do it. I can do…something!!!*

"#Iam! …#me!"

"Yes …I'm really glad that you're you."

"#Mgh?!"

As Mei was crying out, covered in blood—

She felt a cold sensation. Someone grabbed her throat and held her down in her wheelchair.

"#Kei?!"

"Allow me to apologize first… I'm sorry."

Mei turned to see Kei Kakiba.

Her expression was apologetic. She must have come running, as she was in a sweaty school uniform.





Her pretty face came in close, their noses crossing, their lips touching.

"Mmmmgk?!"

A faintly milky-tasting something was poured down Mei's throat.

She immediately swallowed this lukewarm and strangely tasty mystery fluid, then coughed and choked hard. "Goff! Koff! Wh-wh-what…?! What the hell are you doing, jerk?!"

"Curing you… You don't sound strange anymore. It actually worked. You really are cured." With an expression of wonder, Kei hugged her friend tight.

Wiping the various things that Mei had coughed up with a disinfecting wet wipe, she said, "I received instructions from President Narasaki and Neru. Apparently, a strange Phantasm is controlling people."

"…What does that have to do with the weird broth you just made me drink?"

"It's like a medicine. But it's a little gross, so here."

Mei felt like she was being enveloped by fluffy fur. Kei had forced a small bottle into her uninjured left hand.

"…Mouthwash?"

"I've heard that indigenous oral bacteria can transfer via a kiss and cause cavities. Disinfect yourself."

"Am I a baby?! And wait, was that a kiss?! That doesn't count!"

"I wouldn't count that, either. But everyone has different standards, so I thought it might help."

"I'm cool with it not counting, too! And wait, huh…?"

Looking at the bottle of mouthwash she'd been handed, Mei realized something.

Her mind, which had been split in two, was now whole. The feeling like something else was moving her was gone, and that strange, metallic sound—the hashtag—wasn't in her voice any longer.

"No way. I'm actually better… What was that?" Mei asked.

"…You're not weirded out? I just managed to make friends with you, so I don't want you to hate me."

"Agh, come on. You're stupidly cute! Just say it already. I'm not

going to hate you!”

“Really…? Thank goodness.”

With an expression of relief, Kei showed Mei a mostly empty plastic bottle.

She must have finished its contents, as there was just a little left at the bottom. It was slightly bubbly and carbonated, and it was the color of watered-down milk or water that had been used to wash rice. At a glance, it just looked like a leftover soft drink.

“From what I’ve heard from President Narasaki, there have been strange posts on social media and messaging apps, and they have the ability to turn people who saw it into Phantasms… The only message I got was from you, though.”

“You didn’t have to drop that sad implication at the end, loner. So?”

“I’m not a loner. I have you, and I have the two boys.” Kei cleared her throat.

“If you’re counting people you only just met recently, then that makes you a loner…”

“It’s true when they say being right doesn’t help anyone. Anyway, the posts apparently get right into your mind… It’s like you take a Phantasm Tonic just by reading them.”

Since she had dealt with a similar problem before… “I bought the ingredients at a convenience store to concoct Human Tonic. I’m glad it worked.”

“…You can get everything at a convenience store?”

“You just kinda do it. Coffee creamer, Monster Tonic, and cough candy, plus human ingredients, were enough.”

“Human ingredients…”

In order to make Monster Tonic that turned you into a rabbit, you needed fur from the rabbit that was the model.

In other words, what she had just drank…?

“You taste surprisingly good. Like milk-flavored candy.”

“…!” Hiding her face like she was embarrassed, Kei smacked Mei on the shoulder. “Don’t say that. It doesn’t count, it doesn’t count.”

“Yeah, yeah. But you saved me, for real. I’m surprised you knew where I was.”

“You took your phone when you went out. Your location information was all leaked.”

In an ultra-controlled society, a smartphone was invisible chains.

This device, tied to your personal information, would record not only when you took public transport but also catch you on street monitors, tracking your location via facial recognition. After seeing that strange post on her phone, Kei had contacted Fantastic Sweeper, getting advice and location information from President Narasaki so she could hunt down Mei.

“So I came to save you… I figured you wouldn’t want to be running around town naked.”

“You really did save me… Oh yeah, so where are the guys?”

“Up above,” Kei said abruptly, pointing up at the sky.

“Huh?” Mei asked.

She inhaled sharply, sensing something in the air. She sniffed. The scent in the air was somehow mineral, metallic, causing a mild tingle like the sensation of pushing a spoon against your tongue.

It was flowing down the stairs, the escalator, the elevator.

“No way. A fire?!”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to worry… There was just no other way.”

A substance resembling the black smoke of a fire was surging in. It swallowed up the waves of confused and clamoring people like a tsunami, the matte iron-colored cloud suddenly filling their vision.

Her field of view obscured, Kei took her confused friend by the hand and whispered in her ear.

“It’s just Kasumi. He’s covering all of Natsukibara Station area in mist to calm everyone down—and to catch the Phantasm that started the incident.”

*

Amid the twilight, smoke soundlessly erupted like a black mushroom in the center of the big city.

The blackness swallowed the buildings in the station area, a muddy stream of swelling darkness.

In the blink of an eye, the curtain of smoke lowered, enveloping buildings, people, and cars, segregated in a dome shape.

"H-hey, what is this?! A fire?! An explosion?!"

"Huh…? But there's no sound, and it's not hot. What's going on?"

Outside the Masquerade, thousands of people stopped and stared up at the sky.

Looking at social media in emergencies was basically a modern habit. When they reflexively pulled out their phones, the screen was filled not by the usual timeline personalized for each individual but an official warning from management.

Disaster Report [disaster@_Az] 1 minute ago

[Emergency] Major interruption on public social media. **Around 7:45, a gas leak at Natsukibara Station damaged some underground networking equipment, temporarily freezing social media functionality. No estimate on when repairs will conclude.

Disaster Report [disaster@_Az] 30 seconds ago

[Emergency] **Around 7:45, a gas leak occurred in the Natsukibara Station area. The gas is harmless to the human body. Take care to avoid accidents due to poor visibility and panic. Stay where you are and wait for the incident to be resolved.

People gasped, eyes fixed on social media, which just showed that message and nothing else. Young men and women walking together, office coworkers, and groups of students returning from cram school all automatically shared glances.

"Whoa, what the heck…? Something crazy is happening. Let's get this on video!"

"Sure, but social media is frozen, so we can't upload anything! Though I bet we coulda farmed a lot of likes!"

“I really want to post about this. Is this okay? Is everyone safe? I need to call my workplace!”

“They say the trains are stopped, too! What’s going on? Did something happen before social media stopped? There was a report about terrorism or something at Natsukibara—are there bad guys here?”

“Ahhh, I kinda… Ahhhhh, I wanna use search, I wanna use search, I wanna use search!”

Clueless as to what was going on, people barked at one another, sharing their confusion. But they didn’t panic, and Kei and Mei got through the intersection where self-driving vehicles were going back and forth, making their way along the sidewalk to look up at the sky uneasily.

“Why don’t we go take a look? Natsukibara is right that way.”

“No, we can’t. It’d cause trouble. They’ll be doing repair work.”

“Yeah, huh, I just figured I’d ask. There are so many helicopters around.”

In an extremely regulated society, people didn’t panic.

The aerial drones that were mobilized in emergencies and rotor-equipped unmanned public security helicopters cut through the air, making incredible noise with their blades as they surrounded the matte black eruption of fog flying around the area.

It was just like a clichéd disaster movie. The overwhelming scale of the mushroom cloud that had swallowed an entire district of the city and the red lights of the aerial drones, flying around like decorations, captured the attention of the crowd.

“Wow…it’s so pretty…!”

People weren’t afraid. They just gazed, open-mouthed, at the mythic spectacle.

“We don’t have to run?”

“There’s been no alarm and no order to evacuate, so we’re okay.”

“Yeah. So…”

“Let’s go. We’ve filmed enough.”

“Yeah, once social media’s back up, let’s share it! I wonder if it’ll go viral. I’m so looking forward to it!”

“Our credit scores might even go up. But the trains are stopped.”

"Guess we walk or take a taxi. It's a drag, but what can ya do?"

"Yeah, since it's an emergency. Nothing you can do, right?"

There was no panic.

Some people used their phones to reserve self-driving taxis. They got in and hurried home.

Others made to walk back home—everyone maintained public order as they went.

No chains or whips were needed.

Even without any punishment or constraints, they remained orderly of their own free wills, allowing society to keep on chugging. The cogs that maintained this controlled society were quickly returning to their mundane lives, just like eusocial insects.

*

"Monochrome Mist Style: White Smoke Garden!!!"

Atop the Natsukibara Station building, a spot that was the boundary between the Masquerade and the outside world— Reiji Kasumi stood atop the expanse of ugly, organ-like vents and electrical equipment—nothing touristy like an observatory. He was making hand signs like a ninja as he continued to release plumes like a volcano.

"Are you okay, Reiji?! You're all…faint!" Getsu Raisan cried out at his side, mist clouding his vision.

"I'm not okay… This is everything I've got!"

Streaming down Reiji's cheeks was not sweat but black vapor. There was no risk of the Brocken's mist harming anyone—all it would do was drape the area in darkness.

Almost everyone lit sparklers on a summer night. Right now, Reiji was just like that, practically burning his own being just so he could cover the station area in black fog.

He could feel *himself* thinning out.

Like a sparkler making fizzing noises as it burned out, he just kept emitting the mist, spreading it out. At the same time, he was

also restricting it to a certain range, keeping it from being blown away by the winds generated by the unmanned helicopters flying around and the crosswinds blowing between the buildings. That alone was enough to wear on his nerves.

This was how they were going to deal with the Phantasm spreading via social media.

"You're asking for way too much…! Raise our pay already, Boss!!!"

Public social media had gone past essential at this point, becoming a lifeline, so freezing it was no easy task.

Stopping it through legitimate routes would require gaining approval from all the relevant parties, and they had calculated that the Phantasmification of all humanity via the viral smartphone would come far quicker.

But this place was an exception.

This country of Akitsushima was a great nation of natural disasters. Earthquakes and typhoons came frequently, and after a global pandemic on top of that, disaster response had become routine, and it was carried out practically automatically, without the need for approval.

On observing a clear disaster, an emergency situation, the social system had operated reflexively—blocking social media and restricting all information aside from disaster reports to prevent panic.

This functionality had originally been established in order to prevent rumors and fake news during emergencies and disasters, and Reiji, masquerading as a gas leak, had initiated it in order to inhibit the spread of the Phantasm infection.

"I won't last long…! I'm dispersing! I'm gonna…disa…ppear…!"

His droplets were spreading. The sensation of himself thinning out was different from pain.

He was vanishing. He was melting, just like when you poured cream into coffee and it spread around.

Spreading, thinning, nothing would be left in the end. This display of power, enclosing a few kilometers of station area in darkness as a blindfold to stop panic, was, even for a Mythic Beast, enough of a strain that it risked erasing his very existence.

Kakiba went to go save Mei. And that's not all.

Many of the students were infected, controlled by that stupid freethebeast hashtag to head out into the Masquerade.

They weren't acquaintances. They weren't his friends. These were people who had been given human rights as a matter of course, were loved by their parents, studied hard without incurring debts, and were promised bright futures—the winners of life.

"…Hey, Getsu!"

"What, Reiji?" The voice came from the darkness. The blackness was so complete that he couldn't even see his partner standing by his side.

"We're poor as hell. We have no money. No parents… Nothing!"

"I know that!"

They weren't starting from zero—they were starting from the negatives.

They were handicapped right from the start. To merely get to the same line as so-called normal people, they were stuck paying a ridiculous expense, equivalent to multiple ordinary lifetimes.

Could they afford to be saving other people? They were the ones who needed saving. Their work was tough, and the pay was low. They had no social insurance and absolutely no prospects for the future. But even so… Even so…

"Still…we have to help them, save them. In order to let everyone know we aren't monsters. We're human!!!"

"…!"

They were doing this to contribute to society, to show their usefulness, and to secure just a tiny corner where they could belong.

Their lifestyle was hard—just above starvation levels of poverty. They had to scrimp and save just to pay their school tuition. Thinking about the future would be a spiderweb that wouldn't let go. Their boss made unreasonable demands of them and forced them to do dirty work. But they clung on.

They knew where they'd end up if they let go. They had no human rights, no family, no future.

They couldn't rent a place. They couldn't work. They couldn't earn for themselves.

They were excluded from every single facet of human society. Their human lives had been stolen from them.

They didn't want that—no way. And they didn't want to be confined to a laboratory, either.

And like hell were they going to make all of society their enemy and fish through the compost in back alleys while avoiding the eye of cameras.

Hunger—that was the powerful chain that bound these boys.

Was it just simple hunger? No, it was a craving. They were starving for a future. There was something they wanted.

"I'll search. And protect. And save them! Play our ace, Getsu!"

"Okay… Here comes it, partner!!!"

The boys cried out. No…they howled.

The howls of beasts in human form. Cracks ran through the black mushroom cloud, the darkness filling the area.

The clouds parted, and the moonlight that cut through the night sky rained down brightly from overhead.

"Ah… Ahhhhhhhhhh…"

There was a round, silver moon overhead.

The werewolf gazed up at the perfect circle of the full moon, blood pumping in his veins.

The effects of the Human Tonic he'd taken that morning vanished.

A growl rumbled in his throat. He clenched his teeth, his shirt stuffed full of swelling muscle and fur.

"Gwaaaaaagh…! Ah… Ahhhhhhhhhhh…!!!"

Writhing and suffering, he pushed up the pull tab.

There was the *pshhht* of carbonation escaping.

Suffering in pain like an ascetic being whipped, feeling like all the cells in his body would burst, he downed the one release this controlled society allowed—the miracle drug Monster Tonic: Carnivore all in one go.

Glug, glug, gulp…!

He knocked it all back, and it felt hot going down. The intense kick of caffeine made him alert. His consciousness awakened.

Every hair of his body rose in ecstasy. His bones cracked as he

changed, his arms grew, his legs grew, and his muscles tripled in thickness. It was too much for his clothes, and they ripped open.

"Awoooooooooooooooooooooo…!"

He howled far, far into the distance.

This was no manifestation of language. It just felt good, plain and simple. A euphoric high.

It was different from his usual transformation. He was not a wolflike, plain gray. He was a clear ice-blue with a lustrous silver pelt. The golden crescent that lingered from his neck to the back of his head was the remnants of the mesh.

A silver-blue werewolf. The extinct magical infection—weresickness.

The ancient mysticality, the infectious curse, was engraved in his blood, fur, and sperm.

It was the main component of Monster Tonic—plus sugar, flavoring, and tons of caffeine.

This was the origin of the curse that turned humans into Beastpeople. Collected by Beast Tech and now mass-produced in a factory that had nothing to do with him, the mechanism of the animalization they distributed, the prototype for Monster Tonic— The original werewolf—had a true awakening.

*

Hoh-hoh-hoh! Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh!!!

Laughter full of freedom.

Near the station in the Masquerade, enclosed in black mist, the voices of beasts came from somewhere unseen.

No confusion was occurring. In the black and smoky town, many of the Beastpeople were hastily evacuating indoors.

There was a group of about ten of them, all completely naked.

The beasts had the shreds of torn uniforms, shirts, and underwear hanging off their pelts as they panted heavily. There were various types—cat, dog, the most standard of the standard.

The fat one was a bit left out, a pig in rut. A slender grass lizard man flicked his tongue out as he approached a high school girl who had the remnants of her underwear caught between her thighs. Her waist size hadn't changed, so the skirt was still there, her finely furred ass just barely hidden underneath, damp to reveal her heat.

"#Come! #Free! #Beast!!"

"#Hya!! Hya!! Hya!!"

The wagyu cow girl raised her butt in the air—the sight was hard to call pretty.

Her contours slumped from her weight, and her six sloppy breasts were exposed.

Freckles were still apparent on her face, and the glasses that had bent when the position of her ears had changed flew off now as she cried out in ecstasy, "#AmIcute?! #Imcuteright?! #SayImcute!!"

"#Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The grass lizard man cried out lustfully, extending his two-pronged organ from a scaly crotch.

His physique was thin, unhealthy. Even as a Beastman, it was clear his scales lacked luster.

His face was glum—social stress.

"#Iwantedtobehandsome #Iwantedtobeaprettyboy #Iwasneither #Whocaresanymore."

"#Ilosttheparentlottery #theresnothingIcando #Iwannabeacat."

"#TheysayImcreepy #theysayIstink #thebullying #Idontwannabehuman."

"#Copulation!! #Freedom!! #Release!!"

The beasts cried and wailed. It was just like a filthy jungle. A dozen-odd people had abandoned their humanity to become animals.

Watching in amusement were two acorn eyes, smirking at their disgraceful behavior.

"#Hoh-hoh-hoh! #Uh-hoh-hoh-hoh! #Uh! #Hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh!!"

It was a monkey-like voice. In fact, it belonged to a lemur.

A charming creature spoken of in nursery rhymes. The aye-aye,

an endangered animal that lived in the southern islands.

But in actuality, he was far from cute, a bat-like ape with a long, thin black tail and big acorn eyes. On the islands, people even said they were an incarnation of the devil.

He hooked his tail on electrical lines strung up between the ruined multi-tenant buildings of the Masquerade and dangled there. With a penetrating sparkle in his eyes, he tapped at a smartphone with the middle fingers of both his abnormally long hands.

"*#Hoh?! …#Kyeeeeeeeeeeee?!*"

A mad, hashtag-ridden cry.

He held the phone with a third appendage, a long, long nose extending from the device, which was the newest model in a limited color.

It was a flexible cable of flesh, physically connected to the nose of this strange-looking primate.

With a head the shape of an elephant or tapir, with big ears and a hanging nose, he was the picture of a child gone beast.

This was the viral smartphone Phantasm, clad in boxer shorts that recalled the civilization that had produced him.

The Masquerade was buried in black mist. The main street, just one alleyway down, was dead silent.

"#Kyeeho! #Pffft! #Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…!" The Phantasm monkey put a hand to his mouth and burst out in jeering laughter.

From the speakers installed in lampposts on the main street of the Masquerade, a clear voice rang out.

"This is an emergency message from Masquerade Management. There is currently a gas leak in the Natsukibara Station area."

Anyone who knew her would immediately recognize her voice. With her rather shrill and childlike vocal quality, it was Neru, Fantastic Sweeper's secretary.

In the town shrouded in darkness, the people fled the street stalls, diving under the eaves of buildings and into convenience stores.

People accepted that, exchanging uneasy gazes as they listened to the announcement.

"This gas is not harmful to your health. Specialists are currently dealing with the problem and will resolve it in short order. All visitors and residents, please evacuate to nearby buildings and wait for repairs. I repeat, this is Masquerade Management—"

"#Kee-hee-hee! # Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…!!"

"#Kyeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

The lemur was furious.

"#This place #themepark #lawless? #Bullshit!!"

The idea of permitted lawlessness was a lie. The ones who gathered in the Masquerade were virtuous citizens seeking disorder.

Most of them, aside from a few exceptions who had settled in this part of town, still had proper positions in society.

This was the Natsukibara Station area—the lightest, most beginner-friendly place to test things out.

You took the Tonic to put on a mask, and with the caffeine riling you up, you played the fool to satisfy yourself.

This was a state-controlled theme park—a fake chaos via a permitted lie.

The people who gathered here would pay money, talk and buy things, and could engage with each other.

With the order of the outside world underpinning it, even a lawless district such as this was mannerly.

Major accidents or incidents would expose this. People would evacuate in an orderly fashion, without the sort of panic-based looting and assaults that happened in many other countries, protecting the vulnerable and taking shelter.

This was the culture that had been ingrained in them.

Call it the national character—it was an almost domesticated sort of rationality.

"#Kyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Screaming madly, the Phantasm lemur howled at the black mist.

He tore at his thin pelt. Reddish-brown fur scattered, with even a bit of blood oozing out. The way he stuck out his thumbs to suck at his nails was just like a child having a tantrum.

"#Allbullshit!! #Itsallbullshit!! #Ihateit! #Ihateitall!!"

This was Yuuichi Kitajima, a first-year at Akanebara Municipal High School.

He had always been like that—common in name, common in build, common in face, common in personality.

He wanted to stand out but couldn't. He wanted to be clever, but he was not, and neither was he foolish enough to drop out. As a result, nobody really worried about him, so he wound up going to his safety high school instead of a university-oriented one.

So then he thought he would be the class clown. He studied jokes. He looked up internet slang. He showed off lewd humor he'd ripped off elsewhere. It all bombed. His attempt to reinvent himself in high school was a total failure.

"#Hey #why? #Huh? #Whywhywhywhywhy…?!"

He figured he would try something dangerous.

His parents were wealthy. They'd given him a credit card that he could use freely—with no credit limit.

No one had a credit score like the heads of a medical corporation running a major hospital. He was always treating people in an attempt to make friends.

It put people off. This was just modern social literacy. Having a big party and inviting lots of people? Not allowed, contagion risk. Treating people to lavish meals and snacks? That got him told off since others could be excluded. He ignored that.

Official notices were sent to the people he treated, those he'd planned to make friends with. Their credit scores got lowered, and they all wound up avoiding him. So uptight, uptight, uptight.

He had money. He had zero freedom. Society had become too well-behaved, with even people's ill will toward others controlled and plucked before it could bloom. That was especially true in closed communities like schools.

That was why they'd visited the Masquerade. They were a generation that wanted to push themselves to the limit, those who wanted to change themselves in high school.

He aggressively invited his classmates, withdrawing large sums of cash with his card, taking Monster Tonic to head into the lawless district.

When he'd first taken the Herbivore Tonic, it had been because he'd thought about taking Carnivore but had been too scared.

"Whoa, what the heck, amazing?!"

"That's super rare… Awesome, you're so lucky!"

"Huh…? Huh? Whaaat?! For real?!"

So the valuable hangers-on who had somehow come with him had said, tempted by the prospect of spending money.

Looking in the mirror, he'd been impressed. What you changed into with Monster Tonic was extremely random.

Most people got the standard dog or cat.

For herbivores, domesticated animals like pigs, cows, and sheep came up the most. But the one that he had pulled with his first sip was an incredibly rare primate—the aye-aye. People passing by were shocked and talked about him.

#Itfeltgreat!! #Ireallystoodout!! #Iwastotallyviral!!

His dream had finally come true.

Until now, he had been nobody. One of the faceless masses. He had tried to become something special, but his efforts had been in vain.

But when he just so happened to try Tonic, he became special. In fact, he seemed to have a physical disposition for that particular form. Even when he took the other Tonics, he always ended up an aye-aye. He was ecstatic about this revelation. It didn't get better than that.

He was triumphant and smug—elated to be a rare animal, to have a rare form, to be cool and not lost among NPCs, to be in the minority.

The only other thing he wanted was very modest. He wanted attention. He wanted girls to like him. He wanted compliments.

He wanted his desire for recognition fulfilled. He didn't care if

they were lowlifes or idiots. *Just praise me, praise me, praise me, praise me, praise me.*

It was fun, it was the best. He had all the money he wanted. But, but, but—

"Sorry, but I got a girlfriend, so I can't today…"

"But we have a test coming up? I want to study."

"It was really fun having you treat us, but every day is too much. We can't do kid stuff forever."

The things his supposed friends had said echoed in his head.

"#Kyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Over the few months he had spent indulging in partying at night, the hangers-on he had thought were his friends fled.

They had distanced themselves—stupid reasoning. Some had gotten girlfriends. Some wanted to study. Some were playing at being adults and had scolded him. *They're all traitors. After they partied that hard on my dime.*

Once they'd had their fill of excitement, they'd escaped without becoming addicted. That was the modern and smart way to enjoy yourself—they were the domesticated beasts of an ultra-controlled society, people who would return to being cogs once they had vented enough stress.

"#No #no #no #no #no #no #no #no!!

#Dontleavemealone! #Givemeattention! #Fawnonme! #Nonononooooooo!!"

Why is this so hard? he wondered.

He had money. He had time. Now he just wanted someone to have fun with him, to praise him, to compliment him. That was it. He wasn't asking much, was he? *Make me the center of attention. I'll pay. Why can't I?*

Ahhh, I see.

"#Dreams #futures #girlfriends #thingstheywanttodo—"

“#Whocaresaboutthat #allofthem #becomebeasts!!”

The lemur smirked like a businessman who had just thought up a great idea.

The animals were in a mad frenzy. The first ones to be infected were the hangers-on who were connected to him on social media and the miserable girls and losers in his class—even though they’d been too scared and hadn’t come when he’d invited them. In the end— Once you peeled off the veneer, they were dirty people who would expose their animal instincts.

“#Donthideit! #Donttrytocoverit! #Behonestiwithyourself! #Letshavefun!!”

There was an escaped Holstein. The males hunched over the ugly cow who had been their classmate. There was the sound of thrusting hips. It smelled like bodily fluids. That ugliness, that dirtiness was so funny, and thinking about how he had made it happen got him higher than anything.

It was society’s fault that he couldn’t make friends.

They hid their instincts, constantly lying. Even the lawless district they’d made was phony, a theme park.

Despite everyone being so worried about what others thought, they would set boundaries for privacy and avoid getting close—that interpersonal distance. It was society’s fault because people maintained social distancing and only ever connected on social media.

Conviction. Motive. Thrill. The Phantasm Tonic had been crazy expensive. After he won the auction, the package had been left in a designated area by who knows who, and he had injected it without hesitation. Then, seeking further thrills, he turned to the Monster Tonic.

He was now mixed with an aye-aye, the rare animal that had first made people acknowledge him as something special. It was euphoric. He was still so worked up he could feel the blood vessels in his brain making popping sounds.

“#Feelssogooooooood!!”

Watching the animals copulating with drool flowing down their faces, he couldn't resist.

"#Im #doingit #move!!"

"#Keh?!"

He released the power line his tail had been wrapped around and fell.

Due to the mixture of the Monster Tonic and Phantasm Tonic, he was as heavy as a gorilla—over a few hundred kilos.

There was a terrible snapping sound.

His former classmate, the piggy, so excited he was rubbing his crotch with no care to his surroundings, died instantly.

He turned to minced meat under the Phantasm lemur's feet. In the vicinity were the cow and the grass lizard, who were on top of each other.

They were a depressed girl and a boy from his former class. Their seats were close by, so the three of them had talked sometimes at first, but as he had treated them and invited them out, they began to distance themselves from him, even though they were supposed to be his friends.

"#Huh?"

With dumbfounded looks, bodies still connected, the beasts who had been boy and girl turned around.

"#Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

In a childish gesture, he spread both arms like he was crying "hurrah," and then with all of his body weight— He bore down on top of them. Caught between the dirty street and lemur flesh, a burden of a few hundred kilos, the boy and girl were crushed in seconds.

There was a funny *splat*.

A color like crushed tomato spread all over his stomach.

"#Hyaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He danced madly, splashing around in the spreading stain on the asphalt as if he were playing in water.

The Phantasm continued to rub his crotch on the lumps of meat and the ground, completely absorbed in pleasure.

He was excited, uplifted, climaxing. His hips were slippery now as

he ground and ground and ground and ground and ground. The monstrous primate was trembling, legs stretched out. And so he didn't look up at the night sky, didn't notice.

It was just like a blade of light.

The mushroom cloud that swallowed up the station was sliced clean in two. Cut from the peak, the fog slid down like an avalanche in a precise line, connecting the roof of the train station buildings and the back alley.

"#Kee?!"

The other hangers-on sensed something was wrong and panicked, looking up at the sky.

A diagonal line connected the station building and the alleyway, the heights of the heavens and the depths of the earth. It was not light.

The black mist changed shape, becoming an obsidian slide a couple of miles long.

"Dahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

A bullet was sliding toward them.

A werewolf covered in silver fur cried out in rage, heading toward the lemur monster as he thrust his hips in the remains of the three he had killed.

"Stop shaking your dirty ass!!"

"#Urgyahoooooo?!"

It was a super high-speed slide with the friction coefficient as low as it could go.

The werewolf's kick hit like a bullet, striking the Phantasm lemur right in the ass like he had been aiming for it.

The flesh of the Phantasm's ass smushed, and he was sent flying, along with the blood and bodily fluids and cushion of corpses he was still embracing, rolling many times before he collided with the wall of the building on the opposite side of the street.

Crack, crack, snap—the sound of ice bursting in glass.

The black slide that had connected the station building and

alleyway crumbled. That was Reiji Kasumi's Black Technique.

A super-high-speed slide composed of crystallized, hardened essence of the microscopic droplets that comprised him.

Thanks to the evacuation advisory, the city was empty.

Covering the whole area, the Brocken had identified the position of the Phantasm and the beasts and sent them his ace in the hole.

There was no time to lose. They couldn't waste seconds, let alone minutes. They had less than two more minutes left of the gas leak cover story. So before Reiji's personhood completely vaporized, and he dispersed into mist— Before the state of emergency on social media was rescinded, and the Phantasm infection spread once more — "I'll kill you… Get up, c'mooooooooooooon!!!"

"#Yeeeeek?!"

He was just like a delinquent kid from the old days.

His silver mane stuck straight up with golden highlights. Maybe it was the caffeine—the werewolf's eyes were flashing with no trace left of the gentle boy he had been as he raised up his lethal, weapon-like claws.

"#K-kyeee?!"

"Move it! You're in the way, moron!!!"

He was a storm of pure violence.

Even as they were panicking, the beasts attempted to protect their source, the Phantasm. But having only been corrupted halfway, they were ultimately no stronger than average Beastpeople. The moment they approached, they were struck, tossed aside, and thrown back.

It was like hot popcorn. *Thwack, crack, splat*—they flew away one by one.

He dominated—it was a total instakill.

"#K-kee-hee-hee?!"

Covered in blood, the Phantasm rose to his feet, turning the phone he held with his long nose toward the werewolf.

The broken touchscreen displayed a recording app. The silver werewolf was being livestreamed. It went viral in seconds, with thousands, tens of thousands of people connecting. The Phantasm's rules surpassed the laws of physics— "#Flame him!! #Flame him!!

#Flame him!!”

“What?”

The number of people connecting increased. The view count soared.

What had been called a “flame war” in the old days of the internet now transformed into real-life conflagration that exploded. The scorching heat and thunderous roar increased in temperature in tandem with the amount of people watching, then filled the back alley, warping and destroying concrete.

“Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!!!”

It was a broad interpretation of the rules. The twisted desire of the Phantasm had turned the concept of “going viral” into a lethal weapon.

Gleeful at the number of views that continued to increase on his phone, with the camera as his eye, he searched for victims. The middle fingers of the aye-aye had originally evolved to pick at food, and he used these abnormally long digits to swipe the screen.

But in the wavering orange light, the viral virtual flame, there was no one to be seen—

“You’re slow as hell, phone monkey.”

Before the Phantasm could react to Getsu’s voice, he took a gut-piercing blow.

“#Keh-gyah?!”

With abnormal agility, a speed that literally was too fast for the eye to catch—

The werewolf had leaped straight into the virally burning flames, sinking his fist into that gutless stomach as the two passed each other.

Humans and lemurs had the same weak spots—organs that weren’t protected by ribs. The blow hit so hard that it shoved the Phantasm’s diaphragm through his stomach, causing the creature to vomit as he flew backward.

“#Koff! #Koffgoff! #Ow! #Thathurts!! #Stop…!!”

“You’ll be fiiiine. Nice, nice, let’s go!!”

The werewolf grabbed the third appendage, the one connected to the phone—the Phantasm lemur’s nose.

Claws sharp as knives sank into flesh.

The pressure made the lemur's extremities rapidly turn purple, tearing skin as blood flowed where his claws dug in.

Getsu pulled. The Phantasm's long nose stretched like a rope, forcing him to turn and face his opponent, who jabbed him in the cheek— "Punching you won't kill you anyway!"

"#Geh!!"

Crack!

The Phantasm went flying all the way into the wall of a burning building, shooting right through the concrete.

There was no one inside. A rotting, garbage-filled ruin that seemed to be the remains of an otaku goods stop.

Amid the faded figures and character posters scattered around, the Phantasm lemur groveled.

"No matter how much I hit and hit and hit you, it's legally okay!" Getsu howled. "You make a great sandbag!!!"

"#Gyah—gerf—gerk—guh?!"

Fists like iron hammers transformed the Phantasm lemur's face. He was bleeding like a bloody sponge, bones twisted, and his nose half torn off. His front teeth were coming out of his gums, just barely dangling there.

"#Agh! #Ow! #Oww! #Stopitstopitstopitstopit!! #Dontbullyme!!"

"This isn't bullying! Look, I've had a lot on my plate, okaaaay?!"

Crack! The werewolf slammed his foot into the fleeing lemur's ass.

"Adult men! Men! Men! My partner is popular with girls, but the only ones who like me are dirty men!! Just men!! Huh?! Unfair, right?!"

"#I-Idontknowaboutthat! #Stop… #Help!!"

"Why do I gotta hear out what you want?! Am I some kind of goody-goody?! I've been a goody-goody! I always suck everything up! You get that?!"

"#I-Idontkno…!"

"Shaddap. Agh…"

He grabbed the creature's ankle. The Phantasm lemur yelped.

Lifting him with extraordinary strength, Getsu swung him around

like a toy and slammed him into the wall.

The lemur went right through another wall as the ceiling crumbled and rubble rained down.

Normally, in order to defeat a Phantasm, you needed to strike the weakness that was based on its laws.

But this Phantasm—

Everyone knew the viral smartphone's weakness without even asking.

"Hryah!"

"#Gah?!"

All it took to take down a human with a smartphone—

—was a simple punch.

*

Getsu Raisan was a weird name.

The one who named him was not human but AI. Getsu had been created at the research facilities of Beast Tech.

His fetus had been made from a fertilized egg that had incorporated the base for Mythic Beasts, restored from a museum relic. There had been hundreds of them, so the researchers had saved time on giving them identifying names by letting AI do it.

Series: literary names. It seemed the AI had done some strange learning, as Getsu's brothers and sisters had been mass-produced with names that were like lazy parodies of ancient literary masters and poets. Each and every child had been discarded.

Honestly, it doesn't feel real to me at all.

He sincerely didn't care about when he was a baby, and he didn't want to hear about things he couldn't remember.

It was tragic. He did feel like, "Yeah, of course this was more tragic than the experiences of young people with enjoyable lives in

society.” It was clearly unfair.

I bet the people out there would rebel and stuff.

Like, they’d lose it and swear revenge or whatever… Too much trouble.

He was the one successful subject that had just barely turned out human-looking.

He had no parents. Researchers in protective gear whose faces he didn’t know had taken turns raising him.

He had learned his lessons from anime. They were all masterpieces, apparently, though he wouldn’t have known.

Other people had parents and families, and they could make friends and lead normal lives. Their world was so gentle, such a total lie and so completely different from his that he didn’t even think of comparing them.

“Let’s become normal.”

His blood was drawn, his hair cut, his flesh sampled, and once he reached puberty, even his sperm, too.

After every single essence was extracted from him, the researchers determined that they had retrieved all useful data, and he was moved from a children’s room, padded to prevent suicide, to a different facility.

Sharing that room with him was the first person he had ever seen aside from himself.

He had black and white hair. He extended a warm hand to him—

“Let’s be friends. Let’s do this together.”

The first hand he had ever clasped.

It was so warm, so pleasant.

In that hackneyed way—

—Getsu Raisan went from being an experimental animal to Reiji Kasumi’s friend.

“Get up already. You went too far again.”

“Wahhh… This sucks…my head feels like lead… Zo grozz.”

He felt drunk. The overdose of Monster Tonic was making him feel like there was an electric razor buzzing inside his head. The nasty, hangover-like feeling and the discomfort around his organs, sort of like the urge to pee, were a disgusting combination.

The original werewolves had never been able to overcome the monthly madness. When a werewolf took Monster Tonic during the full moon, it caused an excessive awakening of violent impulses and abilities, making him go completely berserk for a few minutes.

Opening his heavy eyelids, Getsu looked around the area. “…Agh. That was refreshing.”

“You saved them the trouble of redeveloping,” said Reiji. “I guess it’s fortunate that it was an ownerless ruin.”

The building was completely smashed up, now an empty lot piled with rubble.

Having regained human form, Getsu was lying there naked, and Reiji came to his side with a spare set of clothes.

Red flashing lights sparkled in his vision. They could see drones dispatched from ambulances parked a short distance away, bringing in the ten-odd Beastpeople wrapped in blankets one after another to take them away somewhere.

“I don’t remember anything, though… Um, I didn’t kill him, right?” Getsu asked.

“Phantasms don’t go down that easily. He’s a mess but alive,” Reiji told him.

Yuuichi Kitajima would probably experience hellish pain in the few hours before the effects of Phantasm Tonic wore off, but he wouldn’t die.

It seemed that the junior Getsu and Reiji only knew by name had been neutralized for the time being.

“Everyone else is being sent to the hospital,” said Reiji. “…Aside from the three students who were already dead when we showed up.”

“…”

If they had been a little earlier, they could have saved them.

Both of them kept that feeling to themselves and didn’t say it out

loud. Beating themselves up over what they hadn't been able to do wouldn't help anything. Time wouldn't turn back, and they didn't have the time for regrets.

"And his phone?"

"Here." Reiji showed him a smartphone in a plastic bag. The touchscreen was completely broken, and it wouldn't even turn on. The flesh cable had rotted and wilted like a dead tree.

"It's completely broken. Now we're all done here, and the weird rumors will—"

Before he could finish, there was a flash of light—and a dramatic *boom*.

"…Huh?"

"Come on. Give me a break…"

When they looked back, they saw it. In the back alley of the Masquerade, with the gas cleared and the state of emergency announcement lifted— Beastpeople were running around completely naked. There were two, three times as many as before—dozens of people. They stripped down to their underwear and ran off the sidewalk and into the road, showing off their bodies in sexual ways as they barged into convenience stores and rushed street stalls.

"""#Free! #Free! #Free!"""

They clamored and howled like untrained dogs.

There were even some who hadn't taken Monster Tonic. All of them had an abnormal light in their eyes—they weren't in their right minds.

"Wh-what the hell is with these guys?! Are they crazy?!"

"S-stay back! Don't come close to meeeeeee!!!"

The Beastpeople panicked. They had most likely been in this area before the uproar had occurred. Those who didn't have smartphones and were isolated from social media ran around trying to escape, not understanding what was going on.

Some of them brandished weapons, claws, fangs, horns, or hooves to try to drive away the beasts, but the panic swallowed up even this lawless street corner and continued to expand.

"The hashtag isn't stopping…?!" said Reiji Kasumi, clasping the broken smartphone, the remnant of the Phantasm that was

supposed to have caused all of this.

Then he went running looking for a phone to contact the company.

*

"Roger. We understand the situation," said Narasaki after receiving a report from Reiji, who had found a phone booth.

A few minutes later, with the receiver cord extended all the way out, he peered at the desk beside him. His secretary Neru had an app open, showing the newly restored public social media page. After Fantastic Sweeper had contacted them, BT head office had exerted its influence, and the account of the source of this Phantasm disaster, the viral smartphone, aka Yuuichi Kitajima, had already been erased.

The post that had been the cause was long gone and couldn't be viewed.

But despite that, the text that had been public for such a brief time had spread abnormally, and the people who were infected—They all made every effort to post #freethebeast.

Reposting. Spreading. Reposting. Spreading. Spreading. Spreading. Reposting, reposting, reposting, reposting, spreading, spreading, spreading, spreading…!

"It looks like it hasn't stopped at all. Is that my imagination?" Narasaki wondered.

"Correct. It hasn't stopped at all," said Neru.

The Phantasmified viral smartphone had already been destroyed.

But those who saw that wish, posted as electronic data—

"Perhaps one should say they've been made mystical. In magical terms, the curse is still active."

"That's so old-fashioned…and has zero scientific basis."

"That's not true. Curses, you know, are something more casual."

A curse was the malice of man.

Such things began in ancient times, once humanity learned to use language.

"For example, what if I were to say to you something like, 'You've gotten fatter lately, haven't you?'"

"Yup. I'll kiww you."

"The way you said that is so cute. But see, you got mad. You were hurt by my words and felt anger. This legitimately counts as a curse. The issue is whether there is mysticality in it. Malice from one or two people is one thing, but in online society, the focusing of ill will is simply an everyday occurrence, a common event."

What once high priests and shamans tried to accomplish by burning sticks in a home ritual or offering prayers to gods and Buddhas—the focus being malice and hostility—was exaggerated by petty remarks online, taken out of context, and very quickly— It would do more than just ruin reputations. Healthy people would become mentally ill and choose death, and they might even become fatally ill.

"The viral smartphone Phantasm is a supernatural power that focuses on the target of people's malice. Before the stupid remarks made by that boy, with his built-up anger and dissatisfaction toward an ultra-controlled society, could be erased, they must have infected thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, cursing them. Oh, I don't even want to do the math."

"…So basically, what will happen?"

"Well, now that the source has been defeated, the curse can't manifest the same power. But of those of the masses who are already infected, people in situations where they would more readily sympathize with the curse will fall at once."

Namely, those like that boy.

"People with built-up dissatisfaction with society. The unfulfilled, wealthy, depressed losers. It doesn't matter what form it takes. If someone who has built up anger that they can't express is infected with the curse…"

Their mind would break, and they would be transformed, becoming a ruin of themselves.

"Obeying the instruction to #freethebeast, they'll gather in this town and become beasts. They'll copulate and eat, reduced to a state less than primitive man. Oh, it seems like things will become

quite awful."

"…Nasty. This area turning into an orgy…"

"It seems we're going to be stuck seeing some old men doing the nasty. Oh, I really don't want that." Narasaki laughed like it was a joke, but he understood that was not all it was.

Most of those who were infected by the curse were still just showing the initial symptoms. It put a hashtag in their words and made them go to the Masquerade to take Monster Tonic. Depending on the will of the individual, they might struggle—like with Mei Mezuki.

But the curse would build as time passed, growing any time society made them feel stress.

It was just like how poison would eat away at someone bit by bit. In the end, they would become unable to restrain their impulses, and after stripping off their clothing, taking the Tonic, and becoming beasts that prowled the city, their rational minds would be worn away.

"Ultimately, I think they might well become real animals. Tens of thousands of beasts being loosed in Kyoto—that's the literal law of the jungle. Even if the megacorps jointly invest to suppress it, tons of people would die. Perhaps the one saving grace is that there is no secondary infection from posts of the infected."

"You can tell that?"

"Since I'm a magus, I can infer that from the energy in the text."

That was to say—the issue was the tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of people who had directly seen the original post made by the viral smartphone.

While the posts hadn't abated even after defeating the source, those who witnessed that or the festival of the infected would not become infected anew.

But still, there was just—

"Too many. At this stage, hundreds have developed symptoms. By tomorrow morning, there will be thousands, tens of thousands… maybe even more."

"…Isn't that too many?"

"I agree. Well, I think this is better than doing nothing about the

viral smartphone, though? Since all you have to do is kill the people who are most affected. We won't lose more than half the country's population."

That was when Reiji's muffled voice came from the receiver Narasaki was holding. *"There should be a way to treat it. If you use Human Tonic, you can stop that curse, Boss!"*

"Yes, Human Tonic can be made at the head office factory. Well, I'm sure treatment is possible, but…"

The problem was time.

"How are we supposed to get the rising number of infected—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people—to inject or drink the Tonic? I won't say it's impossible if you work incredibly hard, but it's unrealistic."

"There has to be a way…!"

"That's what I wanted to talk about. Relax. I have a plan that's more likely to succeed than some ad hoc treatment of the symptoms," said Narasaki, glancing at the stack of documents scattered on his desk.

"Normally, you don't use up Phantasm Tonic all at once. It's very likely that some is left over."

The rag wringer, who had appeared before, hadn't considered quantity and had taken it all at once, which led to him not being able to turn back.

If the aggressor this time were just a little less foolish—

"If we can find that leftover Tonic, then we can create a new viral smartphone. And if we make a post that negates the original post, then it will be possible to save the infected…possibly."

"You have doubts."

"There's no certainty. Let's pray that your underclassman had just a little bit of sense. We'll fight fire with fire. I don't know if it will succeed or not, but it's worth trying."

"Where is it? That leftover Phantasm Tonic. Where…?!"

"I'd say it's likely at his house. We know where that is if you're looking into it—"

"Please tell me."

Reiji didn't hesitate. Narasaki told him the address, and after

hearing it, Reiji immediately hung up. Hanging up his own receiver a few minutes later, Narasaki smiled.

"Oh, he's such a hard worker. He sure seems motivated."

"You're not going to order him? You should take responsibility."

"I don't want to do that. I don't care if tens of thousands of people I don't even know turn into beasts and die. I have no friends or family; I'm quite simply a coldhearted man," the company president boasted—and it sounded quite sincere.

But Reiji was different. Many of the infected were students at the school where he had finally been allowed to attend.

They weren't part of his group. They weren't friends. They weren't acquaintances. But each and every one of them— They were all treasures that the Mythic Beast Reiji Kasumi, the monster pretending to be human, couldn't afford to lose.

"They're part of the normal life that he's finally attained. He'll risk his life to honor the sister he lost to enjoy life enough for her part as well."

Losing his family, especially the sister who was like his other half, had ruined his life.

This was his only reason for living—the only thing left for him to stake his life on.

"In other words, he'll do it even without orders, and I don't have to take responsibility. How convenient!"

"So scummy," Neru said coldly, with complete exasperation.

Narasaki was not upset to hear that accusation from someone with such a cute voice, smiling as he looked down from the office window.

The uproar continued still, all over the place. Since the trains had stopped, the infected had climbed over the walls that blockaded every area, taking Monster Tonic and scattering around the Masquerade.

It was apocalyptic. Looking at this catastrophe, which was like something out of an old zombie movie, he said— "Well, let's have them save the world for us. That's the duty of young men and women. That's always the rule in novels, anime, and manga…right?"

Clichés, the obvious, the way anyone would assume a story goes —

Those were also curses of a sort, one of the laws of mysticality that ruled the world.

*

He ran a long way. Too slow. He had no time.

"Settle the bill later," said Kei. "I'll get a receipt."

"…Sorry. Thanks," Reiji replied.

Local unmanned taxi drones had gathered around the station area.

Even after the announcement that the gas leak was over, the trains were still stopped and hadn't started moving again.

Systems to control population flow activated to carry the riders left behind, and AI made decisions on increasing the number of trips and running vehicles. After talking with his boss, Reiji and the utterly exhausted Getsu left the Masquerade for the time being and headed outside.

The address they had been given, the home of the now-arrested viral smartphone Phantasm, was in the center of the city. It was in a residential area that was so high-class that the land values were insane and ended up being a stupidly large detached house—a mansion, more like. Reiji couldn't even imagine how many hundreds of millions it must have cost.

It was too far to get to on foot.

Openly using his special powers as a Mythic Beast on the outside would absolutely destroy his rock-bottom credit score.

So he considered taking a taxi instead, but without sufficient credit, he couldn't use electronic payments.

"I can't ride on my own. I can just barely use the train with paper tickets, but I can't do taxis," he said.

"They're pretty convenient. Though I rarely use them since they're expensive," said Kei.

After Kei had saved Mei, she'd waited at the station building for them.

She met up with Reiji there. He was looking for a way to travel, so she stopped a taxi for him. He promised to have his boss pay for them since it was a work-related travel expense, but paying what would probably be over ten thousand yen had made her blanch.

Sitting side by side in the back of the taxi, the two impoverished students whispered to one another.

"Are you okay?"

"…I'm fine, though I feel nauseous. More importantly, you rest a little."

"That's not what you'd call fine, is it…?"

Both of them were utterly destitute. Reiji sat in the rear seat of the taxi beside Kei as she gave her smartphone accounting app a grim look. Sinking way back into the seat, Reiji checked how he was doing, asking himself, *Can I keep going…? This is bad. Pushing myself this far has almost completely drained me.*

My humanity has faded too much. It will take me time to recover. That's pretty disastrous for hardening my body with Black Technique.

He'd pushed himself earlier to fake that gas leak accident. It had taken his maximum output to cordon off the whole area. Mobilizing all his gaseous senses, he had searched for the culprit and sent Getsu to the scene. Doing all that had basically taken him to his limits.

Should I have Kakiba make some Human Tonic? No, I can't do that.

If I take Human Tonic, then I won't be able to use my powers for a while. I should resolve this incident first, at least…!

Abusing his powers as a Mythic Beast was inviting the loss of his humanity.

The silver bullet for that was Human Tonic, drinkable humanity. It brought back his human mind like balancing gut bacteria. That was Kei Kakiba's mysterious power, as a girl who could only be described as quite nonstandard herself.

"You look pale… Are you all right?" she asked.

"You seem pretty bad, too. Are you that broke?"

"You are, too. There's no point in either of us bringing that up."

"…I want chocolate…"

As Reiji sank deeply into the taxi seat, his eyes fell shut over and over, but he forced them open again.

Exhaustion weighed down his whole body like mud, and he felt like he could pass out at any moment.

"And not a cheap chocolate bar, but something with peanuts and caramel cream in it…"

"One of those high-calorie ones? Sounds delicious."

"I've never had one before… There are lots of things out there that seem like they'd probably be good. Until I manage to taste those things, I still can't go to my sister…"

…and die.

He still couldn't say anything.

"She died in elementary school…when she was too young to know anything, to understand anything. That's why…"

He would help people. He would keep on being a good person.

Even if that meant abandoning his pride and licking the boots of society.

"I want to go to heaven…because I'm sure she's there. I'll be able to see her again. Then I can tell her about all the things that I'm sure she wants to know…"

Absolutely everything.

Girlish romances. A happy normal life. And the taste of delicious sweets.

"I need to give that back to her…," Reiji muttered, nodding off sleepily, his consciousness fading.

"I see… I don't know about your situation, and I won't pry, but…" Kei tugged firmly on Reiji, pushing him over since he was too weak to resist.

His head landed on her soft legs, with her thin skirt between them.

"It's about ten minutes until we get there. Rest a little," she said.

"…Is it okay for me to rest on your lap? Won't I be arrested for indecency…?"

"The laws of human society aren't that strict. You'll just get a

warning to maintain social distancing."

"So then I can't. It'll lower your credit score…"

"I can't pay you, so this is the only way I can thank you." Kei stroked Reiji's mussed black and white hair with her somehow cold but shockingly soft fingers.

The faint vibrations and sounds of the taxi, the softness of her thighs through her skirt, and the warmth of her skin made his eyelids droop.

"Thank you for saving Mei," she said. "I'm glad I didn't have to lose a friend."

"…Oh yeah. I'm glad, too… Really…glad…" Not able to bear it anymore, Reiji closed his eyes and fell asleep. Kei went on her phone and dismissed a warning.

Your social distance is too close. Selecting **No** to the popup asking if she was being assaulted, she felt her cheeks warm slightly.

"This counts as work… So maybe I can get thirty thousand yen out of it."

"…!"

In his dreams, feeling like he had just heard something rather unromantic, Reiji trembled unconsciously.

About ten minutes later, they reached their goal.

Stepping out of the self-driving taxi, Reiji was feeling a little better from his nap, though it hadn't been long. He and Kei headed into the shadows.

"This place really is high-class. The street cameras have hardly any blind spots," he said.

"It feels like we're doing something very bad, doesn't it? We're being so sketchy," she said.

"I feel the same, but we're being sketchy for justice, more or less. I can't do this unless I think that way."

Cautious infiltration was impossible. Though he was a little better from that brief sleep, he was just about at his limits.

"Sorry, but wait here. I'm going," he said.

"All right… Take care."

After exchanging those common parting remarks, Reiji suddenly realized something. "…Ah."

"What is it?"

"Oh… It's just been a long time since someone has seen me off like that."

It was nostalgic and made him glad, and… "It's given me some energy. I'll manage somehow."

His wording was vague. He took care not to say anything that would make you think of a crime, so nothing suspicious would be recorded by the street cameras, and Kei wouldn't be questioned as instigating. That way, on the chance that he was discovered, he would be the only one held responsible.

The house belonged to a member of the wealthy. It had high walls, security cameras, and a mountain of sensors connected directly to a security company. Any ordinary thief would normally never approach, but the boy became mist and slipped right in.

…Hah… Ngh…!

Being mist for a long period of time was like diving.

It felt suffocating, like holding your breath, giving him the impression his consciousness was thinning. It made you afraid of becoming dust if you kept it up for too long—like you would never be able to go back until even that faded and your sense of danger waned.

I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared. Don't forget that, don't forget that, don't forget that!!!

When he completely lost that fear, that sense of danger, then he would vanish completely.

Though Reiji couldn't imagine whether he would just become mist and scatter or become a being that caused trouble for society, just like the monsters he had captured in the past—Phantasms and Mythic Beasts.

Becoming a black, wafting mist, he went over the wall and into the yard. The garden was huge—and very well-maintained.

Efforts had been made to groom the flower beds. This was no cheap home vegetable garden. It was like a classic sample of landscaped architectural aesthetics, calculated down to the last

flower, with densely packed trees and many garden stones.

This is suffocating in a different way.

It was so proper and perfect.

Passing by the cameras and security devices that were placed surreptitiously among the garden trees, he headed for the house.

A home of special privileges, made especially to prevent infection.

It was shaped like a block of tofu.

The square concrete seemed unrefined at a glance, but the frighteningly sturdy steel-beamed, two-story building continued to stand when everything around it had been destroyed, bearing the great earthquakes and disasters of the past.

This is hard. There are filters on the air conditioning, so it's hard to get in…!

The place wasn't completely airtight, but there were virus filters in the air conditioners and other ventilation systems, making it very close.

Install some weapons, and this would be a fortress. Agh, rich people.

Major earthquake? Major flood? This fortress-like house seemed to be saying, "Come at me anytime."

But there was a way in. First—

There's no filter on the keyholes.

The entranceway. The way it was constructed, the keyhole was connected to the interior. There was a seal in the crack between the door and the wall, and it was also well-insulated, but they wouldn't have expected sentient gas to be slipping through.

As mist, he sent his whole body through the keyhole made specially to prevent picking, literally like the eye of a needle.

Inside the house, an automated cleaning drone was operating. At a glance, this place seemed like a model home.

All the furniture was of the kind of stylish and minimalist design that the wealthy favored, with lots of open space. There was nothing left on the floor, no stripped-off socks or slippers lying around.

In the kitchen—a cold dinner.

Cold tempura. Grated daikon soaked too long in the sauce. Dry rice—sustainable, low-carb rice.

Lacquered chopsticks had been placed properly on the chopstick rest. A lidded bowl of cold miso soup. Enough for two.

I thought it was a family of three.

The house was surprisingly lacking in signs of life.

The washroom and bath were slightly damp, signs of having been used recently. The toothbrushes had been sterilized. There were two of them—one for an adult woman and one for a child. In terms of skincare products and shampoo, there were also only those for a woman and a child.

There was really no sign of a man—of the husband who was the proprietor of the medical corporation. The food and cutlery were for two, and the fridge was filled with healthy vegetables, fancy meat, and frozen dishes in small portions, cooked by a home helper.

There was not a single drink that a man would enjoy with an evening meal, like beer or wine. If that were all, he would assume it was just personal taste, but the whole house was set up like a hotel right before a customer came.

"Wahhh… Hng! …Yeeek…"

—?!

A wail made his vaporized heart jump.

As black mist, he approached the source of the sound. On the other side of the door was a presence, the faint warmth of a person.

It was hot—their body heat was up. Arousal signals that were unlike those of sickness. He sensed a woman in her thirties on a king-size bed. She must have been quite worked up since she was breathing hard, and it smelled like sweat.

…Is that the viral smartphone's mother?

Avoiding just that area, he investigated each and every room. There were three empty rooms—he couldn't understand the behavior of rich people. The home gym had not a speck of dust and a mountain of bodybuilding equipment that showed no signs of having been used.

There was a sort of music lesson room with a piano and expensive-looking instruments decorating it. It was equipped like a

professional used it, but there was no sign anyone was using this, either; the place was just like a hotel with no customers.

They had no pets. There were no signs of life.

Then when he sneaked into the third bedroom, he finally found something.

The mist took shape, and Reiji regained human form. "…Hng, hah…! Kah! Gah…!!!"

He was in a cold sweat all over, his clothes sticking to his body and feeling gross. Having finally taken form again, his body felt off. He could even feel the contraction of his organs as they finally started moving.

"So this is…his room?"

Inside this too-neat house, this was the only place that felt lived-in.

His first impression was that this was a child's room. It was filled with merchandise for a video game that was very popular with little girls and boys—*Bakemon.*

The bed was themed around the main monster, a lightning rat character. It was topped with sheets for a small child, printed with the same character. The books on the shelf were all manga, strictly those for younger children, even picture books.

"This doesn't look like the room of a high school student. It might be dirty and small, but our apartment is a more relaxing place…"

There were rebelliously discarded underwear and sweaty shirts, along with a mess of snack wrappers.

And something very out of place.

"…I've seen this sort of situation in a manga before. But this is real life…"

Now that deceptions of obscenity were regulated online, there was no way for minors to access mature content.

A person's citizen management ID was referenced when connecting to and using the internet, and they couldn't browse websites with content designated for adults. In the past, it had apparently all been available, be it 2D or 3D material, but now that was impossible.

Placed carefully on top of the study desk were a few books that

had to have been bought in the Masquerade.

"…I didn't want to know this dude's sexual preferences…!"

The analog books, circulated in the lawless district, were uncensored and printed on paper—pornography of underaged people who hadn't taken Monster Tonic. The cover was obscene, with models in immodest school uniforms.

The books were carefully sorted and placed on the desk, along with tissues.

Complete service, as if to say, "Go ahead and use it." Every single need taken care of.

"What is going on with this house?"

It looked very normal, but something was critically wrong here.

He shivered—it was creepy. Like a cage in a zoo. Words like *confinement* or *abuse* rose in his mind. The monsters tacked on the walls, the new game consoles, the subscription-loaded smart TV.

All were expensive models that Reiji couldn't hope to own. But he didn't feel even slightly envious. He was more scared than anything. Thinking about living forever in this room made him feel like he'd lose his mind.

"Calm down… Now isn't the time to be exposing another family's dark secrets."

That was the job of the family courts or the childcare offices, departments like that.

At the very least, it wasn't Reiji's business. Telling himself that, he searched the room, but there were no signs of Monster Tonic. In fact, he didn't feel like someone could hide anything in this room.

Whether it be under the bed, in the drawer, or above the ceiling…

He had an uncomfortable feeling—a choking feeling of hopelessness like every nook and cranny of the room was being observed.

"This isn't it. So then…if he was to hide it, then where…?!"

If there was any place in this house where the son could maintain his privacy—

Reiji quietly made his way down the hallway. The boy's room was on the second floor—rather, the whole second floor was for children.

It was partitioned off like a house for a two-generation family,

with its own washroom that was very close. There was a click as he quietly sneaked into it. The faint rubbing metallic sound of the doorknob mechanism wasn't scary, but he was at his limits.

Thinking about when I leave, I don't want to use my mist for this investigation anymore…

He would just barely be able to escape. He could turn mist one more time, and once he was out of this house, he had to use Human Tonic immediately. Otherwise, he didn't feel like he could hold onto himself. It was a terrible sensation, and he felt it keenly as he probed around.

The inside of the washroom was sanitary. It had the newest shower and toilet for humans, incomparable with what Reiji had at home.

The toilet was polished to sparkling, looking so new that he could practically see his reflection in it.

…I knew it. It can be locked from the inside.

It was probably the only of that sort in this house.

A place where Kitajima would be allowed to lock the door and be alone. His private fortress. If there were anything here— It would be in a place where you normally wouldn't go when cleaning…!

"…Here?"

Without hesitation, Reiji opened up the lid of the toilet tank.

No matter how sanitary you kept things, you would hardly ever clean inside the water tank.

That went all the more so if the toilet was new. The inside of the tank had no limescale or mold and was as good as new, and floating inside was something wrapped in plastic and crudely held there with tape.

He stuck his hand in. He touched it, gripped it—something was wrong.

"Empty…?!"

There was nothing in his hand but an empty plastic bag.

It had been rolled up and returned to its original position, but the tape had been peeled off once, so the bag opened.

The contents had been taken somewhere, and all that was left was a vague sensation—

"#AreYouYuusFriend?"

"…!!"

He jolted at the voice coming from the other side of the door and turned around.

But he hadn't sensed a thing. There hadn't been any footsteps. And there had been no signs of anyone moving.

He slowly turned the knob on the washroom door. Trembling in fear, he saw someone standing in the immaculate hallway.

Flushed cheeks, underwear askew, sweaty skin. She was in her early thirties—a young mother.

Her panties were damp, her privates exposed between her bare thighs. Her eyes were dark with desire and raw femininity, making her seem less like a mother or typical housewife and more like someone described as a "trophy wife."

"#YoureVeryWelcomeHere. #IneedToOfferYou #ProperReception #Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee… ♪"

Practically naked, the trophy wife let out a repulsive laugh.

A root of flesh extended from her right hand with its fake nails, connected to a tightly held phone.

The nerve fibers in it bulged and pulsed. This thing that throbbed like blood vessels was—

Without question, the viral smartphone Phantasm.



Chapter 6

#Explosion



"#Youknow #IGotMarriedtThreeYearsAgo #WhenIwasTwenty-Eight," the trophy wife said as if she were engaging in small talk by the side of the road.

Her clothing was plain. A long, beige skirt, an ordinary top, and not much makeup.

Her subdued attire had reset—the bared breasts, askew bra, and wet thighs were all gone.

Her eyes were pointed at the boy before her, Reiji Kasumi, but unfocused.

The discordant hashtag that sounded in her words was proof that she had become a Phantasm.

"TheDoctor #DidntGetAlongWithHisWife #IAsked #WhyHeChoseMe #WhenThereWereSoMany #PrettyNursesInHisLife.

"#AndThen #HeSaidHeWantedAMotherForYuu #HisSonWhoWasAboutToTakeHisEntranceExams.

"#IWasSoHappy #TheDoctorChoseMe #IThoughtIWouldBeAGoodMother #…But."

She muttered and mumbled and muttered some more.

It wasn't how you'd talk to another person. She wasn't even talking to herself.

Her disjointed speaking was like how you'd address a stuffed animal or ornament—delirious rambling.

"#…HeWouldntMakeLoveToMe.

"#HeSaidHeLikedMen #AndIntroducedHisLover #ABoyWithLongHair.

"#HeSaidHeWasGoingToLiveWithHim #AndHasntComeBackOnce #EverSince.

"#ImAloneWithYuu #ButIWasOkayWithThat #IdGivenUpOnChildrenAnyway…

"#IWasOkayJustLivingWithSomeone #AndItWasFunToTakeCareOfHim.

"#HeWasSlowlyOpeningUp #AndOnceWedGottenUsedToEatingMealsTogether #TheySaidHeCouldnt #GetIntoHighschool.

"#HisGrades #TheTeachersEvaluation #WereUnsatisfactory #NotEnoughFor #AGoodSchool #…ThatsWhatHisTeachersSaid.

"#ANormalSchool #Akanebara #WontDo #Yuu #WorkedSoHard #ItDoesntMakeSenseForHimNotToBeRewarded #…But #But #ItWasNoUse #IWantedToHelpHimWhenHeWasDown #EncourageHim #ComfortHim #AndSo #…YouKnow?"

"…"

Just listening gave Reiji a headache.

In the washroom, he glared at the trophy wife standing at the entrance. As she spoke, she continued to rapidly work the phone connected to her hand by a root of flesh—her right thumb the one thing moving, repeatedly flicking the screen as if it were a different creature.

It was like she had two different brains.

Spouting her broken and delirious monologue, the monster of urban legend was already disseminating destruction.

Can I stop her…right here, right now?

He mustered all his strength. Despite his exhaustion from overusing his powers, he gathered the minute black particles that comprised his body.

Blades solidified. Knives slid in between the fingers of his clenched fist, and he threw them.

"Monochrome Mist Style: Black Feather Fangs!"

"#ThatBoy #HeCameTo*Me*."

"Gah!"

His fingers and hands were frozen. He was stuck in the ready-to-throw stance.

It was a tingling pain. It felt like an electric shock, and it came

from—his eyes. They couldn't leave the trophy wife's right hand, the screen of the smartphone, and something came into his brain through his vision from the displayed text.

"#ISaidNo #SinceWereMotherAndChild
"#ButHeCried #SayingButBut #IFeltBad #HeWasSoCute #ICouldntTakeIt
"#IFeltIHadToProtectHim #ThatIfILovedHim #HeShouldLoveMe."

There was no meaning to her rambling.
The characters displayed on the phone were all there was—

Stop *Tomare* s-t-o-p STOP *Tingzhi Arret Pause…*

Poison in text.
It entered through the corner of his vision, a hypnotic suggestion that hit the moment he recognized it as language.
Translated automatically, the infectious information was recorded in every language of the world.
This was the power of the viral smartphone Phantasm.

"#TheMoneyThatManGaveMe #IsYuus #IGaveItAllToHim.
"#WeHaveSexThreeTimesAWeek #ButNoPenetration.
"#IDecidedToHelpHim #FeelGood #GivingHimUnderwear #AndToysAndThings
#IWasSoExcited #IMadeDinnerEveryday #AndWhenHeCameHomeIWelcomedHimWithAKiss.
"#ITookCareofHimInTheBath #OnTheToilet #HelpedHimAtNight #IDidItWithPleasure."
"…Guh…gah…?!"

Stopping, stopping—his heart.
That single toxic hashtag infected him—stopping his thoughts, stopping his organs, stopping his breathing, stopping his immunity.

It attempted to bring to a halt all the systems that ruled his body. It was an order to stop absolutely, meaning the same as death.

"#IWasSoHappy #WeWereLikeNewlyWeds #OnceYuuGrewUp
"IPlannedToHaveABaby #ICould #FinallyBeHappy.
"#SoIThought #But #ThatBoy #OnceHeStartedAtAkanebara
"#HeWantedAGirlfriend #HeWantedFriends #HeWantedToParty #ThatsWhy #HeSaid
"#HeDidntNeedMe #Anymore #HeDistancedHimselfFromMe #JustLikeThatMan!!!"

Rip, rip, rip, rip, tear, tear, tear, tear.
The sound of the trophy wife's free hand tearing at her hair.
Blood dripped from the hair she'd pulled out from the shredded skin, but it healed immediately—having become a Phantasm, she was immortal.
Her eyes, unfocused and filled with madness, locked on Reiji as he stood there, frozen and dazed.

"#TheresNoWayHeCouldntNeedMe!! #ThatCantBe! #HeShouldNeedMe!!
"#YuuAbsolutelyAbsolutelyNeedsMe!! #No!! #No!! #No!!"
"#YuuNeedsMeToTakeCareOfHim #WithTheFoodHeEats #HisStudiesEveryDay #TheBath #AndToilet #HisFriends #AndSex #INeedToManage #EverythingEverythingEverything #OrIGetWorried!"
"…!"

The trophy wife cried out, her face all twisted up, dripping all sorts of bodily fluids.
Glaring at her twisted face as he was almost frozen entirely, Reiji turned himself into mist.
When his vision was gone, it was a shock like suddenly flipping a breaker. Vaporization completely stopped his organs. That completed the viral smartphone's order and made it lose effect, and recognizing

this was the case, he escaped out of the washroom ventilation.

Go back? I can't. I'm too exhausted, I can't kill her…!!!

He grit teeth he didn't have. He had to retreat, take Human Tonic, and restore his humanity, or he couldn't deal with her. And that would give that thing time—this was a critical failure, a massive blunder of global proportions. He knew this but judged that this was beyond what he could handle with guts and spirit alone. As he was fleeing literally as fast as he could go—

"#Yuu!! #Yuu!! #NowWereTheSame!! #Im #TheSame #AsYou!! #ImGoingToSaveYou #WaitForMe #AreYouInThatPlace? #TheMasquerade!!" Her shrieks rang out.

…She's coming!!

This was a dead-end situation. He just barely got through the ventilation, his body on the verge of dispersing.

He forced himself to take shape. On the second floor of the building, he leaped out of the ventilation installed on the wall. Of course he fell.

"Gah—guh—keh!"

Thunk, whack, clang. He crashed around like a pinball, hitting the roof and falling into the garden.

He hit himself hard all over. He could feel himself bruising everywhere. He'd just barely avoided breaking bones—

But as he was examining himself, the sensors the security company had installed in the yard detected him.

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep! The alarm rang out. He was reported to the security company. There would be an emergency dispatch, and the police or the security company would be there in a few minutes. Help came quickly to people who paid for everything, of course.

"Kasumi?! Hey, the alarm! Hurry! Over here!" came Kei's voice. It was coming from outside the walls, where she wouldn't get caught by the alarm. She must have come running on hearing the sound of him falling.

"…Ah… Ugh…!!"

Following that sound, he summoned all his strength. He floated over the wall and descended on the other side, falling like a piece of

trash. The girl immediately wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and he leaned on her as they rushed into the self-driving taxi that was parked there.

Weeoo, weeoo, weeoo, weeoo…

As the security company's sirens were sounding with flashing lights blaring, Kei told the driver, "Natsukibara Station. Hurry!"

She tapped her phone, indicating the direction and paying the fare.

Inside the self-driving taxi as it set off, he crumpled, slumping against her.

"Kakiba, I'm sorry… You saved…"

Reiji Kasumi trailed off as he passed out, exhausted.

*

"The Security Department's Emergency Suppression Team has arrived on location."

"Turn off the alarm. Signs of a fall onto the roof in the yard. A tree's broken. A thief?"

"No sign of the culprit. It's possible he got away. Make the request to coordinate with the police."

A squad of men in sci-fi gray body armor stepped into the yard.

There were ten of them. All had received special training from the police or military.

The company provided security exclusively for important people and the wealthy: Siren Security Services. This special squad was one of the forces approved by the nation to use lawful violence, making huge profits while they were at it. They worked in close connection with a command AI at headquarters.

Everything they said was communicated to their information network and sent to headquarters. They coordinated with nearby cameras and information sources to understand the situation and would receive appropriate orders. This PMC never had to deal with the fog of war or a lack of intel.

"The door won't open. It's locked. Can you undo the security

lock?"

"It seems the resident is at home. They should have gotten a message on their phone, but there's no response. They may not be able to."

"We have no choice, and we got permission. Undo the locks with master authority. We're going in!"

There was a *clack* as the front door was unlocked.

It was authorized as an emergency situation, so the contracted security company remotely controlled it.

The squad burst in through the front entrance of the mansion where the alert had come from, rushing in to secure the residents.

"Orde—"

"Huh…? Hey, headquarters. I'm getting static. Is there network disturbance?" the commanding officer asked as static rang out in his helmet, unconsciously touching his ear.

"Order ooor jee order sssssssssssssssssss…!"

"Hey! Hey?! Headquarters, headquarters…?! Shit!"

He cut communications. Turning off the mic to speak normally, the commanding officer told his subordinates, "Seems like a network disturbance. We may not be able to get intel support from the HQ AI, so just do it like in training."

"Roger… The client to protect is a woman, and according to the home security system, she's in front of the washroom on the second floor."

The commanding officer gave the signal to move up. The advance guard briskly raised their guns, going up the steps in their shoes.

As the sound of their boots rang out, under the pale light of white LEDs, they saw the client they were to protect.

"…?!" The squad gasped aloud in shock.

The woman's clothes were in disarray as if she had been the subject of violence. But that wasn't all.

What made the trained squad shocked and flinch away was the glazed look she gave them.

"#YourShoes."

"Huh?"

"#DontComeIn #WithShoesOn #IHaveToClean #Apologize."

They had to assume she didn't understand the situation. Was she deranged?

The commanding officer assumed she was and tried to console the woman, who seemed to be a victim. "#Sorry."

Huh?

The word that came out of his mouth shocked him.

This wasn't supposed to have happened. His body was moving against his will.

He was like a puppet on a string—and then, as if it were the natural thing to do, the squad of ten trained men went to the sides of the hallway, standing at attention and saluting. Showing the greatest respect, they froze sharply where they were.

What's going on?! I—I'm not moving?! My body—ahhh, ahhh…?!

The scream never came out. His eyes alone just barely moved around underneath his protective goggles.

The soldiers were all trembling. In their ears, an electronic divine message rang out amid the static.

It was coming from the phone connected to the woman's right hand, which she was operating with scratch-like flicks.

"Order…or-der. Follow—directions—I—go—there—!"

"""#Yes, Ma'am! #Yes, Ma'am! #Yes, Ma'am!""" all the men replied.

His brain was filled with static-ridden orders. He felt so happy that it prevented him from recognizing how strange the sensation was.

A sense of unity. The certainty that they were doing the right thing. The joy of being part of a group. His body was still standing there, his brain alone on fire, bewitched by the ecstasy.

It was the joy of submission—the happiness in being controlled. The delight of serving a gentle mommy.

She—the trophy wife—slowly walked forward. With the divine phone connected to her right hand, the children all followed after her.

The ten armored members of the special squad escorted her straight to the armored vehicle they had come in. It was a six-

wheeled heavy armored car—the engine roared, and it deviated from AI control. The self-driving mechanism was turned off, and it raced along, out of control, on manual operation.

"#PleaseGo #PickUp #Yuu."

"""#Yes #Mommy!""" they all replied.

It was their Mommy's order. Mommy's wish. A request from Mommy.

It felt good to obey. He wanted praise so badly. Ah, he had so many brothers.

Going out with Mommy is fun. I'm so happy. Let's go pick up my big brother.

With his hands on the wheel, the commanding officer ached with excitement.

"#Goingforadrive #Mommy!!"

Kreeee…! Babam! Kshhhh…!!! The sound of hard braking.

With the automated controls turned off, the armored vehicle plunged toward the intersection.

It sent multiple self-driving cars flying. Their passengers wouldn't have even imagined an accident, and it crushed them like tomatoes.

The vehicle made a beeline straight for the cordoned-off district, charging into the Masquerade.

*

On a street corner at night, voices sounded all over the Masquerade.

"#Freethebeast!!!" An infected white-collar worker abandoned a bicycle with a hashtag-ridden cry.

Putting his hands on the chain-link fence that divided the Masquerade from the outside world, the barricade that sealed the place off, the man made rattling noises as he climbed over it. Even when his suit caught on some wire that was sticking out and his skin tore and he was hurt—

"#Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! #Screwthatexploitativejob #Imnevergoing #toworkagain!!"

He laughed, not feeling the pain even slightly.

He leaped from the top of the fence, which had to be three meters high. Of course he fell, crashing into the poorly maintained road. His limbs bent in the wrong directions. Bones stuck out from his crushed flesh. But he was smiling, smiling, smiling, smiling.

He was free from stress. The excreted adrenaline made him forget his pain, and he crawled into the light.

The vending machine shone brightly, even buried by trash and leaning to one side. It was a sort of holy ground that even the illegal residents who hung around in the government-controlled slum wouldn't touch. It was the reason they had given up on being human.

It featured a particularly refreshing-looking ad for Monster Tonic. He touched the bursting carbonation on the package logo. His phone had broken in his fall, but he touched it to the machine anyway. It wasn't recognized. Everything was paid for within this district.

"#Kyeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Shrieking like a monkey, the white-collar worker tore off his necktie.

He fished around in his suit pockets and even stripped off his socks to look inside. He searched around for change. He slammed his wallet against the ground.

His credit cards scattered out. Membership cards for shops. Mingled among them was a metallic sound—

"…! Hyahaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!" He leaped on the change, restraining the trembling in his fingers as he inserted it.

He didn't even choose one of the three types of Monster Tonic. He violently slammed the vending machine over and over.

He mashed at the buttons. The machine recognized a certain drink and, with a *thunk,* spat out a chilled can.

With the joy of release, he touched the can to his cheek without opening it. "Ahhh…"

He wore an enraptured smile. The carbonation leaked out with a *pshhht*. The color was like green tea. Full of caffeine and sugar, bursting with flavor. He upturned the can and dramatically spilled it into his mouth, glugging it down in one go.

"#Ukyaaaaah!!!"

He pulled a completely ordinary beast.

Fur grew out under his shirt. Having become a dalmatian—a dog man—the white-collar worker howled in search of a pack. His cry rang out in the street, and a number of voices echoed in return.

"""#Free! #Free! #Free! #Free!"""

There was what looked like a female office worker dog with her pencil skirt hitched up around her waist.

There was a cat with an elementary schooler's backpack and an old lizard man who had abandoned his cane to crawl out from a garbage bag. Old and young, men and women, the "beasts" with their unfocused eyes and animal howls, herded together.

Some began copulating, others rummaged through stinking garbage bags, and the majority of the herd—

Groups of mostly canines leaped out from a number of the roads that headed to the outside, running on all fours to the center of the Masquerade, surging onto the main road.

*

The Masquerade—Otaku Road.

The Natsukibara area had once been called Electric Town, later becoming a tourist area, a holy land of anime and otaku merchandise. Due to the slump in demand after the global pandemic, it had been cordoned off. Plans to revive it stumbled, leaving it as ruins of its former glory.

Shops opened up in droves wherever they pleased: grocers, maid cafés, dubious *izakayas*, restaurants, forbidden product vendors. The Beastpeople who had fled to wait for the mystery gas to go away were appearing again to check on the shops.

"With this uproar, I bet social media on the outside will be stopped. What's going on?"

"Some of my products are gone! Some bastard stole them in the confusion. Shit!!"

"Calm down. Call a canine to sniff out where they went."

“Tsk…what a hassle. Agh, what the hell…?” a goat clerk wearing an apron with the logo of a plastic model maker complained as he checked his scattered products. These were real illegal products that would make an enthusiast drool, the sort that would get you instantly arrested on the outside.

The hard recoil of the bio-BBs, fired with high-pressure gas, was very popular for its realism. All the various airsoft guns were in glass cases and securely chained down, but right as he was about to check for stolen products—

Yelp, yelp, woof, woof, yelp, woof, yelp, woof, yelp, woof, woof!

“Th-the hell?!”

“Are these guys outta their minds?! Gyaahhhhh! Th-the bastard bit me!!”

“Yeeeeek! S-sto-stop!! Don’t lower your pants! Noooooo!”

From the alleyways, from the station building, from all over the place—

The beasts had broken through the barricades. The Phantasm-corrupted animals had “freed the beast” and were forcing their way in as a pack.

Surging onto Otaku Road, some of them drooled as they bit nearby Beastpeople, shredding their flesh.

Some howled and howled as they ran around with their genitals out in full view, and a few female dogs pushed down a group of three male virgins holding anime goods, shredding their pants and rocking their hips.

“”””Gyaaaaaaaaahhhhh?!”””

Panic, confusion, chaos.

The civility produced by this ultra-controlled society had managed the gas leak disaster. But there was no way to handle these beasts seized by madness, the frenzy of these Phantasm-poisoned, who had become quite literally unrestrained.

“W-whoa! It’s just like a zombie movie!”

“Which means…ah! Hey! It couldn’t be these guys are…!”

“It’s actually okay to shoot ’em, right? Wahooooo!!”

The goat man who was on staff was a pathological gun maniac. The other was his partner, a skinny weasel man.

They were preppers, people who believed society would fall apart and made a hobby out of getting ready for it. They broke the glass cases of their own accord, picking up the airsoft products one after another, uncasing the high-pressure gas that had been loaded to illegal levels.

Ba, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da!

“Yip-yip-yip!” “Awoof! Awoof!” “Squee! Squee!!!”

“Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha! They’re running away, they’re running away! This is fun as hell! Zombie hunting time!”

“Wait, l-let me shoot, too! Lend me a gun!”

“Yeah, go right ahead! Kill ’em! We’re having a zombie party tonight!!”

With the energy from concentrated caffeine, the Monster Tonic brought out the wildness that had been forgotten during the emergency.

They took out all the illegal air guns displayed in the shop and shot, shot, shot at everything.

An improvised flamethrower from the blowtorch that had been frying chicken at a street stall. A metal bat. A crowbar. A fake metal sword. And most of all, the weapons Beastpeople were most familiar with—claws, fangs, hooves, horns, body weight, muscle.

The beasts ran around, trying to escape the shower of bullets.

As the goat man was tasting the excitement of shooting living creatures, a different beast was sneaking up behind him.

They must have been on their way back from school—the baby mouse was wearing a backpack for elementary schoolers. It was a child that had been infected by the Phantasm.

“Huh? …Gyahhhhhhhhh!!”

“Sqeeeaaak!!”

Sharp front teeth shredded the goat man’s shin. They ripped through the thick fabric of his jeans, and fresh blood scattered around.

The goat man rolled around holding his leg. And that wasn't all—the Beastpeople he'd been trying to drive off all attacked him, starving for blood. In the blink of an eye, Otaku Road had become a battlefield.

It was gory. A dog man bit into a pig-faced beast, ripping his nose off.

The excited pig pushed him to the ground and stomped on him with a hoof, and the dog man's leg cracked and bent. Ripped-off ears and noses and broken fingers and pieces of foot were scattered on the road, just like the aftermath of an explosion.

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

"Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Laughter, laughter in chorus. It wasn't just the beasts who had lost their reason—the Beastpeople, high on adrenaline and caffeine, felt no fear or pain, and neither did those who were accustomed to violence once their self-control had been abandoned.

Major losses—an arm, a leg, or an eye or nose being ripped out—were no problem.

When the effects wore off and the Beastpeople returned to human form, even their missing body parts would be restored. There were examples of broken fingers, torn-off ears, and even arms and legs regenerating if you were deep into a Tonic high in total euphoria.

It was like the festivals that had once been held long ago and far away—the nights when people had occupied the streets and crowds would go crazy.

And then, in the middle of this uproar, someone did something that made waves.

…Screeeeeeeeeeeech!!!

"Huh?"

A hard brake and the explosive sound of impact.

Like a battering ram breaking into a medieval castle, an armored car with its automated driving turned off crashed into the barricade just a little ways away from Otaku Road, demonstrating its power to the fullest by bursting right through it.

Boom, slam, crash!

"Gyaaahh?!"
"Th-they fucking ran someone over?!"

The armored vehicle slammed into a passerby who was unfortunately walking by as it plunged into the Masquerade.

This part of town had become a paradise for pedestrians—cars were basically never used, and even when they were, they drove slowly. People around here weren't used to cars, but fortunately, there was only about one-tenth of the normal number of people on the streets due to the emergency gas leak warning.

And the place where the most gathered—that was Otaku Road, right where everyone was brawling right now. The bloody armored car, with its brand-new crash marks, charged in without hesitation, running down street stalls to come to a stop.

"#Ohmy #Imsorry?"

There was that abnormal ring at the beginning of her words, the polluted static.

As white smoke came up from the armored vehicle's engine, the first thing to step out of it was not an air gun.

It was the elites of the Emergency Suppression Team, armed with real and honest-to-goodness guns. The violence of a controlled society, with its strict military discipline, the weapons that had been trained in order to protect the ruling class—the wealthy and the elites.

"#Hey #doyou #know #Yuu?"

The person who stepped out of the armored vehicle was still human and not a Beastperson. She looked as if she'd just come to shop at a neighborhood supermarket, smartphone in one hand as her sandaled feet stepped out into this gruesome scene.

"#DoesntAnyone #Know? #…SoThen."

Firing. Gunshots. Impact.

A cosplaying horse man's body danced as he fell. He dropped with his long tongue sticking out, passed out.

The bullets were nonlethal rubber for riot suppression. But they were real guns—much more powerful and louder even than the illegally modified airsoft guns—with real-sounding bangs. Even in the chaos, people were dumbstruck.

The gun enthusiast cried out, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa… the Emergency Suppression Team?! That's the SSS special unit!!"

"Why are they he—? Actually, I want a picture, but I don't have my phone…gyah?!"

The escorts surrounded the trophy wife, who held her phone in one hand.

They were just like knights serving a queen or children protecting their mother. Ten men with body armor and small arms that were very out of place in the Masquerade came out of the armored vehicle in a circular formation.

"#BringMe #Yuu #RightAway."

"…Uh, who's that?!"

"#RightAway!"

They didn't ask permission. Intense gunfire. Beasts and Beastpeople alike. Their training must have kicked in, as their aim was abnormally accurate.

Reactions were varied. Some crowds were running around trying to escape while beasts were worked up. Some tried to fight back while others lay there covered in blood.

"#Yuuuuuuuuuu!! #WhereArrrrrreYoooooou?!"

Single-mindedly, with no other thing in her head—

The cry of the trophy woman seeking love, a cry like a mother seeking her lost child, rang out along with the gunshots.

The panic couldn't be contained. Gunfire, shrieks, explosions, screams, moans—amid a concentration of all kinds of cries and anguish from humans and animals, a different kind of chaos was scattered.

"Bwaaaaaugh! I can't see! I can't seeeeeee!!"

Child pornography had long since been eliminated from the public realm in a storm of regulations on free speech. A boar man with his arms full of stacks of it—he must have stolen some product for sale during the confusion—fled madly with his eyes shut tight.

Explosive booms sounded out sporadically. As the soldiers fired their guns wildly without knowing what was going on, the frenzied beasts and Beastpeople tried to fight back. That was the sound of the soldiers striking back with tear gas grenades.

Dyed a faint red, the gas was meant for humans but worked on Beastpeople as well. The chemical substance got into the membranes of the eyes and nose and inhibited sharp senses, and since those of Beastpeople were keener than those of humans, it caused intense, disabling pain.

The boar man had inhaled some, causing tears, snot, and drool.

Coughing, he tottered as he fled, crashing into a taxi that was parked there.

The car was flung onto its side—it was small and light, unlike vehicles of bygone days. Both frame and body had been optimized, and it couldn't take a direct hit from a huge Beastman, enlarged by Monster Tonic to become over a hundred and fifty kilograms.

The door of the toppled taxi was kicked open from inside, flinging it away.

A skirt fluttered. With a healthy thigh held straight up—

"Let's go, Kasumi! Walk!"

"…Leave me…behind. At this rate, you'll be—"

"Okay, so you're not going to walk. I'll carry you.

"We should have stopped at a convenience store on the way. Then I could have made some Human Tonic…!"

The exhausted black-and-white boy—Reiji Kasumi.

His humanity was starting to evaporate, and he was so thinned out that you could see through him from behind.

Clasping a hand that felt like a dry sponge, Kei Kakiba, who had taken Monster Tonic in the car—the half-human, half-rabbit high school bunny girl pulled him out from the toppled vehicle, shouldering his weight before she started running.

Fires here and there. Beasts and Beastpeople tangled up together. Tear gas sprayed all over the place. Gunshots. Airsoft shots. Scattered lumps of flesh. This was a battlefield, a hellish site of chaos. The goal was close by—the Fantastic Sweeper office building.

"You'll be okay if you can make it there, right?! You're really fading, Kasumi!" she cried.

"…They have…Human…Tonic…!" Reiji gasped. "If we can get…to the office. But…!"

"I know it's dangerous. So treat me!!"

"What…?!"

"There's something I've been wanting to eat. I'd given up on it since it's expensive. But if you're thinking about dying, then I won't hold back. Ultra-thick!! Ramen!! With gyoza!! You're treating me, you got that?!"

"…You're…risking your life…on something…like that…?! You… idiot…!"

"Yes, I'm an idiot… Just like you, pushing yourself this far to save other people!"

With the strong legs of a young rabbit, she bounded swiftly along.

She raced through the battlefield. But even if he had thinned out,

carrying someone inevitably slowed her down.

The Fantastic Sweeper office was right in the middle of the chaos—just a little ways away from the street with stalls that the armored vehicle had crashed into. But frenzied Beastpeople and beasts were in a wild melee around it, and the two of them could see a few windows on the first floor had been smashed.

They didn't know if it was safe inside.

Mei was probably being kept safe there with Getsu, who was down from the aftereffects of turning into a werewolf, and the secretary Neru and Narasaki. If they just managed to get there, things should work out somehow, but it was so far.

Gunshots again. Stray bullets hit the ground at Kei's feet.

For a heartbeat, her face twisted in fear. But she just kept her eyes forward and ran.

Canine Beastmen and corrupted beasts were all in an utter tangle, trying to rip open each others' throats. The only difference between them was whether they were naked or clothed, and they were growling and rampaging around as if their wild instincts had returned.

There was no time to go around—carrying Reiji, she cut right through.

A claw swept out randomly to rip out a tuft of hair from her cheek, dying her white fur red.

They reached the alley that led to the back entrance of the Fantastic Sweeper building. But Kei's feet stopped there.

"#Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

"…Disgusting…!"

It was one of the beasts who had been infected by the Phantasm—a *kitsune* woman.

She must have been a night industry worker or in customer service. The remnants of a fancy dress were hanging off her, with red underwear between her furry thighs.

She looked practically rabid, with unfocused eyes and drool dripping from her fangs every time she growled.

A rabbit being chased by a fox—it was like a line out of a fable. She glared at Kei—the drool increased. *Slurp, slurp.*

She was licking her lips. Desire—hunger. Like a mongrel that had been left some food.

"…Let me…go," said Reiji. "Kakiba!"

"I've never fought anyone before," she said. "But I think I can do this."

"Drop the baseless confidence! She's lost her mind, so you'll get eaten for real!"

"I see. I understand. But…" Kei Kakiba did not flinch. "Between letting a friend die and letting that dog me my whole life…and taking a chance on pulling it off… Somehow, I wouldn't regret the latter."

"…Stupi—!"

"Kyeeeeeh!!" The fox woman shrieked wildly as she attacked. The high school bunny girl defended the boy, trying to fight back.

Right as the beast was leaping at her—

"*Tri-istake*!"

Wand shining, he drew a spell in the air that sparkled.

He held his magic wand as if he were directing an orchestra. It wasn't like the fancy weapons depicted in fantasy novels. This ancient mysticality was like a stick, made from what could have been bone or wood.

The characters he drew exploded, hitting the beast—the fox woman in midair. Then…

"#Keh?# #Keh! #Keeeehhhhh?!"

"Huh?! …She's floating?!"

It was like antigravity.

The fox woman flailed around. She literally floated about ten feet in the air, bobbing like a soap bubble, and didn't come down.

As Reiji and Kei were astonished by this mysterious phenomenon that defied gravity, they heard an easygoing voice.

"Oh, how nice. A young man and woman in big trouble, defending one another! Seeing such youthful charm, I found myself holding back. I was wondering if a miracle might happen and turn things around completely."

The line was said with no care at all to their situation, the voice coming from the back of the Fantastic Sweeper office building, near the rusty and tilted emergency stairs.

Standing in a spot that seemed to say that he didn't care about safety was a man in a suit with a magic wand in his fingers. The company president Narasaki was speaking to the image of Kei and Reiji reflected in the crystal ball he held.

Hearing his voice, Kei and Reiji gave each other conflicted looks.

"…What do we do?" she said. "I can't honestly thank him. He really saved us, but he's so obnoxious."

"You've got that right…," Reiji agreed. "How long have you been watching, Boss?"

"The whole time. Since, as you know, ancient magic is usually less convenient than modern technology, but being that it operates on different logic and laws, it can be very useful at times. For example…"

Whatever sort of mysticality he was using—in all the confusion, and even with the road separating them, Narasaki's voice clearly reached their ears, and they even felt his presence as if he were right beside them.

"This is what they call clairvoyance. There are many ways of doing it—the Eastern method and the Western method—but this time, I tried using the divination method of ancient Rome. This has been more interesting than some clichéd Japanese action film."

"Th-that's really convenient… If you were watching, I wish you would have helped us…!" said Kei.

"I did help, though remotely. It helped that you entered my casting range."

"…If possible, it would have helped more if you'd come to get us, though," said Reiji.

"Right now, at the office, we have a pretty girl in a wheelchair and a useless staff member who's currently down. I have to keep an eye on them, or the rioters might burst in and harm my valuable collection or the two of them."

"So the collection is more important… That's pretty irritating…," Kei grumbled.

"Ha-ha-ha, of course. That's what I meant by that! Most of the

collection is quite valuable. Ancient magical tools are expensive—easily five times all your lifetime wages." Narasaki's voice and words rang out quite clearly.

Carrying the exhausted Reiji, Kei yelled out into the distance, toward the building, "Kasumi is in trouble! He's about to disappear at any moment! Hurry and get him Human Tonic!"

"Fine, fine. I don't want my staff to disappear, and he is in the middle of a job, too. All right."

Narasaki pulled out a bag with an ampule of the drug in it and a needleless syringe—all with a plain and industrial design—then once again waved his wand. The lit bag flew through the air and floated in front of Kei and Reiji.

"Great! Now with this!" she cried.

"Ahh, but wait, Kakiba. If he uses that now, he won't be able to use his powers. That would be a bit of a problem since he still has some work left to do."

"What?! …You're still going to make him work?!"

"Of course. That's why he's allowed to exist at this company."

Was that as a business owner or as a magus?

That cold voice reached Reiji Kasumi's ears, and—

"Inject the Human Tonic, Reiji. However…just half, all right?"

"…!"

Reiji grabbed it with a vanishing hand.

*

When his hand touched it, it was like a transparent soap bubble bursting.

There was a flash of light, and the package lost its buoyancy and fell into Reiji Kasumi's hands as an urgent voice said to him, "Wait!"

It was Kei Kakiba. He couldn't walk on his own. He had lost his

humanity, and his legs were translucent. Supporting him when he lacked the strength to walk, she called the reckless proposal she'd just heard to a halt.

"Half? Not like I know, but will you be okay with that?!" she asked.

Her knowledge regarding Human Tonic was very limited.

She was able to reproduce it by following the example. But she didn't understand the effects in detail.

When Reiji had completely worn himself out in his other battle before, she made him drink a rough amount, thinking, *"I guess this is about one dose's worth?"* and that replenished his humanity and made him lose his powers for about one hour.

While the drink type she'd made was different from the injectable type that seemed to have been made industrially—

"With just half the amount and a half recovery, will you be able to…stop this crazy riot?"

"…I…have to do it."

Reiji thought she smelled kind of nice.

Leaning on Kei Kakiba's shoulder with her supporting his weight, they were close enough that he felt her breath on his cheek and earlobes.

A whiff of economy shampoo came from the back of her neck and hair, with the faint scent of her body. That mild animal smell was that of a rabbit—the effect of Monster Tonic. The scent of all those mingled was not at all unpleasant, and it was actually relaxing.

"Now…is our only chance to stop this riot, to stop it here," he said.

"That's right. The second viral smartphone—she's a very introverted character." Narasaki's voice rang out from nowhere in particular.

She had accounts on public social media, but she basically never posted. She never posted about her private life, maintaining her silence. Of course she had no followers and was not in a situation where she could spread things, however—

"Those conditions have nothing to do with her powers," said Reiji.

Now she was just yelling in real life, with no thoughts of using

social media.

But if that monster regained a little bit of her reason and disseminated the hashtag—the Phantasm corruption—

That would set off the strategic nuclear weapon of an information society, pulling the trigger on humanity's destruction.

If that happened—

"Worst case, then all of humanity will become her baby," said Reiji. "Can you live in a world like that?"

"Well…"

"I want to live in this shitty society…and that's all. No matter how twisted and uncomfortable it is. I have the obligation to live a normal life…enough for my family's part."

It was atonement, revenge, a mission—and a wish, a prayer.

It was the one reason the boy called Reiji Kasumi lived, his holy hope.

"I'm going to do this job. In exchange, give me what I want, Boss."

"Hmm. What is it? I'll hear you out."

"…A smartphone. Give Getsu and I smartphones that connect with society."

The right that these ruined monsters were abusing—

The proof of engaging with society and being recognized as a member of it—plus the number that was linked with it and a social media account.

Reiji sought this proof of humanity that he had never been granted despite longing, desiring, and wishing for it.

"Give me proof that I'm a member of society. If you'll allow it, then I'll put my money on you, Boss."

"That's reckless," said Kei. "You're going to die, Kasumi. For just a smartphone…the cost is too high!"

"It's enough for me, Kei Kakiba. Even though I'm talking with you right now, I'm not like you."

He was an animal that had just barely been allowed to exist, with society's pity and his boss's string-pulling.

By gaining a smartphone and a citizen registration number, he would officially obtain the right to be recognized as human.

"It's not enough. We legally don't even have the right to be friends with you and Mei."

When they got that—for the first time—they would be officially acknowledged as members of human society.

"I want you to deposit our pay in our own accounts, not accounts Neru made under the company's name. Let us pay our tuition with our money, not through you. Give us the ability to pay for our shopping and get through the ticket gates without paper tickets… That's all. That's my request."

"…"

It was so modest and so heartrending and so futile.

These were things that would be granted whether you wanted it or not if you were a human born in society. To bring the negative to zero—that was all he asked for.

Not a positive—zero. He sought rights that would start from there and that could be built up.

"I have conditions," said Narasaki. *"The second viral smartphone…perhaps we'll call her Mommy Smartphone? Arrest her without killing her. Securing her person is essential for the logic that will bring this situation under control."*

"Can this situation be controlled?"

There was the Phantasm infection that was disseminated on the internet and the monster mommy who was on the rampage.

Dealing with either one of these things already felt hopeless, but President Narasaki replied like it was just a matter of course, *"I'll play my ace, too. Trust me, as your beloved boss."*

"I don't recall ever loving you… But if you can settle this mess, then I'll do it."

"Okay, I trust you. Now then, smartphones. Smartphones… hmm…"

Narasaki suddenly hung up the phone. On the emergency stairs of the company building, he leaned his elbows on the rusty railing.

Pulling out a wallet that seemed very expensive, he quickly checked the cards and bills inside—

"Will used do?"

So he said with a stingy look.

*

Three-way panic, panic, and more panic.

It was just like three types of amoebas eating each other—

There were the Beastpeople who had pulled out illegal weapons.

There were the Phantasm-corrupted beasts, and then there was the Phantasm Mommy Smartphone who controlled the ten men of the special unit as she searched for her child.

Gunshots, yells, and coquettish calls all mingled. There was the sound of light air guns popping, the heavy roar of gunshots, the wails of raging Beastpeople—and the joy and moans of those who had turned their backs to the fight and were copulating and thrusting their asses in the street.

Such a hell had been impossible even in a lawless area like the Masquerade. Just like bubbles spilling out from a pot, those who had already reached climax and had worn themselves out fell in the street, dropping dead on the site of the battle. How many were alive and how many were dead—

You couldn't even count. There was no sense left for that anywhere—

"#Yuu #itsme #…wherearеyou? #wherearеyou?!"

Following her tag-ridden cries, the special unit that waited upon her like surrounding walls all fired.

Ba, da, da, da, da, da, da, da! Death drums rang out. The Beastpeople struck with the bullets writhed in pain, but unless they were very unlucky and got hit right in the head, a few shots from guns made for humans wouldn't kill them. They were robust enough that they couldn't die.

"#Mommy #thebullets…"

"#OhMy?"

Having fired out all the magazines in hand, the squad members

looked up at their mommy in confusion.

"Reload!! Reload!! Hyahaaa!!"

"The bastards have run out of bullets! Dude, this isn't an FPS. It's the real deal!!"

"Now, do it. Kill them. This is legit self-defense. This is our big chance to be able to bite some humans!"

The crazy Beastpeople were surging in.

The crowd was seething with blood and violence, raising their claws and fangs to rip off armor, paring away at the squad members, who just stood there hollowly. A spray of blood flew at the trophy wife's face, making the rhythmic sound of rain hitting a tent.

"#OhMy #…HowDirty #SuchBadChildren."

Wiping the blood off her cheek, Mommy Smartphone raised her right hand. "#Everyone #Search #ForYuu."

"Yeeep?!"

The colors on the touch screen—the bursting text flashed.

There was a rumor that had once gone around on the old internet—hypno apps.

It was a genre of indie works that included indecent sorts of creative works, like self-published porn. This was one of the abilities she had gotten from the rumors at the dawn of advanced telecommunication devices—that if you had a smartphone, you could do anything.

This was the extreme end of the viral smartphone's skill tree.

It went a different direction from the first viral smartphone—rather than agitating and infecting others through the medium of sympathy via social media, this power was specialized to control other people, and it seeped into the Beastpeople, maddened for blood.

""""#Awooooooooooooooooo?!""""

Confused howls. The Beastpeople who surrounded the special unit—dogs, cats, pigs, snakes, lizards, frogs, cows, sheep—they all broke, a frenzied look in their eyes as they upturned garbage bins and broken asphalt in search of a Yuu who wasn't there.

""""#Free! #Free! #Free! #Free!""""

One group brushed off the hypno app—the group of beasts.

Just yelling about the perceptions they'd shared on social media felt good. It was the same idea as the fascism of the old era, with large crowds gaining pleasure out of championing their shared sense of right and wrong and chanting in chorus.

The crowds of Beastpeople and beasts instantly collided, becoming tangled together.

Biting, scratching, and punching—as this haphazard melee was going on, the Mommy Smartphone was simply standing there in a space that was empty like an air pocket, calling forlornly for her lover-child.

"#Yuu #where? #whereareyou…?"

"He's not here. Calling for him is pointless," Reiji said quite ruthlessly.

"#?!"

The moment the trophy wife twitched—

There was a gentle spraying *fssssss* sound. Trailing white fog whirled in a circle, and a white whirlwind appeared suddenly to isolate the Phantasm from the crowds, blocking it off.

"Monochrome Mist Style: White Vortex World."

It was the surgical removal of cancer cells, the special quarantine of swirling gases.

"This White Technique comes as a set with Black Womb… Ever seen how cotton candy is made?"

The white that colored the swirling wind was a floating fluff of air. Sensing danger to the Phantasm, the special unit and the Beastpeople, all those under the influence of the hypnosis, leaped into the swirl without hesitation and cried out, "#Mommy!" Right then—

"#Gyaaaaaah?!"

The moment they touched the whirlpool, translucent and superfine fibers tangled around them, hardening like cocoons.

Just like how you made cotton candy by having melted candy whirl in the air to become fibers and thrusting in a stick for the candy to wrap around—anyone who tried to dive in flailed and struggled, but the stiffened fibers did not break, digging into their flesh and hardening.

“Once you’ve touched it, you’ll be tangled up in a prison of threads. Don’t think you can escape,” the boy’s words rang out from no particular direction.

“#Escape? #…Why?” Mommy Smartphone tilted her head innocently. “#IHavent #DoneAnything #Wrong. #IJust #WantToSee #Yuu #MyFamily—”

“That’s what I’m saying is harmful. I don’t care what sort of carnal passions you have for your child. It’s legally dangerous, but it’s another family’s problem. You guys resolve it yourselves.”

Within the storm, the whirling fiber bits rustled as they tangled together, forming a shape.

They wove a human form that became a solid. A black-and-white boy—Reiji Kasumi—took form, appearing suddenly.

“Stop disseminating. It’s causing trouble for others. I’m going to restrain you.”

“#Aha?”

The Phantasm laughed as if to say, “Just try it.”

She needed no words. The loyal servants who surrounded her, the children who adored their mother, all cried, “#Mommy! #Mommy! #Mommy!”

The special unit forced themselves to pull their triggers with their torn-up fingers. The Beastpeople leaped in, one after another.

But the white cotton captured everything: the giant herbivorous Beastpeople who weighed over a hundred kilos, the sharp carnivorous fangs and claws, and even the supersonic bullets.

“I don’t know if you can understand what I’m saying to you.”

There was a hiss as Reiji’s fibers tangled around the bullets as they cut through the air.

Now swelled up to the size of ping-pong balls, the bullets abruptly lost speed, smelling of gunpowder smoke as they approached Reiji.

But he didn’t even avoid them as they came straight for his head, just standing there, waiting.

With a stupid-sounding *boof,* a bullet flew toward Reiji’s eyeball, disturbing his handsome outline only slightly as it passed right through and wound up rolling on the street.

"#Huh…?!"

"Attacks with no mysticality won't work. It's not even a contest."

Reiji Kasumi—the Brocken of unknown origins. The ancient mythic of whom even legends had died out.

Direct attacks from a new Phantasm would work on him since the various false convictions of those who lived in the modern era were no lesser than the ancient mythics. Being fresh and far more populous, one could even surpass him.

However… "You're just controlling these people. No matter how they attack, they can't do anything to me. Guns? Useless. I'm not even sure nukes would work. If we're going to fight, then why not do it yourself, ma'am?"

"#!!"

The broken Phantasm didn't hesitate.

Kicking away the sandals on her feet, Mommy Smartphone leaped up, barefoot. Her right hand was occupied with the phone, so she picked up some rubble that was lying on the street with her free left hand and slammed it toward the boy's head.

"#Where! #isYuu?! #Bringhimtome!! #Kyeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Boof, boof, boof, boof. Sounds like hitting a pillow. The rubble in the trophy wife's hand struck the boy over and over again like a murder scene in a suspense movie, abruptly piercing right through him.

"Is there mysticality in a piece of rock? Sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

Reiji's manner was composed, but he wasn't actually that calm.

He was only able to move right now because—

Kei Kakiba. Or should I call her the cocktail witch?

It was all thanks to her power—the mythic miracle she had performed unconsciously.

"Give me three minutes."

So Kei Kakiba had said when Reiji made his boss accept the condition of providing him with a smartphone and said he was going to go fight.

Opening the lid of the Human Tonic his boss had sent, Kei frowned as she took just one drop, flicking out her tongue to lick it.

"A little sour… The people it uses as catalysts are all different sexes and ages. More men. Just measuring out half visually and injecting that would be no good. Your humanity would burn out in an instant, and you'd just vanish."

"…You can tell?"

"I don't really understand it, but I can tell. I think they omitted a number of necessary catalysts in the manufacturing process. It's like just that part of the scent is irregular, and it tastes like they're using substitutes to cover it."

"…Is that right?"

"It's as different as ramen at a shop versus cup ramen."

"That's pretty different…!"

Ignoring Reiji's shock, Kei took the syringe and drew up the liquid medicine inside.

Her expression was serious. Precisely and carefully, she drew up to just the first line, less than one drop. "And…and, um. Kasumi, stick out your tongue!"

"Mmmfff?!"

She stuck her hand into Reiji's mouth, pushing past his lips to tangle her fingers with his tongue.

Then she drew her fingers out of his lips with a pop, drawing a trail of saliva from them.

"This is you. I'll make your components into a Tonic and add just a bit of it."

"My saliva…?"

"I'll supplement your humanity while reinforcing the conflicting mythicality. If I didn't do that, you'd be unable to use your powers right after taking it. But you'll still only be able to go at full power for five minutes. I can't guarantee any more than that."

Did she have a basis for that number?

He didn't know—but he was certain that Kei's judgment was

accurate.

"I don't mind. I trust you," he said.

"Yes, you'll have to. Leave yourself to me and let me handle it."

There was a vending machine nearby. She didn't even have to search to find an empty can lying there.

Picking it up, she disinfected it with the hand gel that everyone carried around with them these days.

Then she upturned the can, touching her finger with Reiji's spit on it to the indent at the bottom, adjusting it to make it a very small amount. And then she poured in the contents of the syringe, the precisely measured amount of Human Tonic.

Fsssss…!

"It's bubbling up?!" Reiji said.

"It might be bad for a normal person, but you'll probably be fine."

It puffed up just like in the ads that featured witches doing make-your-own-candy sets.

With each stir, the Human Tonic reacted to the saliva, bubbling up with purple bubbles. It was a pretty crude witch's cauldron.

After this abnormal change, he didn't know if it really was Human Tonic, but—

"…!!"

He steeled himself and drank it down.

*

And the result was—

The drug worked amazingly after that abnormal reaction—in exchange for tasting absolutely disgusting.

"Urrrk…ngk…!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh… Gah!!"

Blood vessels all over his body swelled and popped out, writhing like earthworms.

The extracted humanity of the being that was Reiji Kasumi was overwritten, but that wasn't all. The catalyst excited the elements that made him who he was, giving him an incredible high. Like this—

Now I can do it. I'm at full power. No, even better!!

He thought of that burial smoke—the familial despair concealed in the tragedy that had happened in this district.

The Beastpeople who had transformed with Monster Tonic, the special unit who were controlled by hypnosis, and the beasts who were infected by the Phantasm—

They all had families in the outside world. They had people they cared about—and the schools they went to had students and staff. So then he wouldn't let any more tragedies happen—on his dignity as a human being and his pride as a monster.

He made hand signs. These were inherited techniques that had been passed down in the Kasumi family since ancient times—they had no inherent meaning, just hand games. But the accumulated will, the inherited tradition, and the time spent telling them amplified their mysticality.

"White Vortex World—Secret Technique: Shiro Uneri!"

O ancient Phantasm, become *youkai*—

The wind moaned. The whirlwind that enveloped the boy and the Phantasm grew larger, covering the whole city block as the conflict continued.

The atmosphere was wild—the circulating winds spread to every street corner, just like the currents of a river, as a school of large fish swam around. No, they were not fish, they were like old rags, or rather dull-colored—

"Youkai that were depicted in the Edo period as disguised as old cloths or rags.

"This is one of my Secret White Techniques, named after them… Capture all these pests together!!"

""""Gyaaaaaaghhhh?!""""

Screams echoed loudly. White lumps came flying in like great fish—they were like dragons, swimming around in the air as if surfing the windstorm as they followed people, smashing into them.

Strike. Impact. Explosion. Restraint. The lumps burst the moment

they made contact, instantly unraveling to wrap up Beastpeople, beasts, soldiers—all of them with powerful, mysticality-tinged threads like balls of string.

"G-get away from me! What the hell is this?!"

"This smells funny! Geughhh…gross…!"

"The main components are air pollution," said Reiji. "They're high polymer joined by the catalyst of mysticism…synthetic fibers.

"Think of it as spider thread made from trash."

So the bad smell came from the air. There were no environmental standards in the Masquerade, so soot and smoke spread in the air, along with the nicotine of cigarettes, forbidden drugs, and exhaust gas. Threads woven of all sorts of pollution were gathered together with mysticality.

A few hundred people had been going wild on the street corners, and all were wrapped up in dirty balls of thread to lie on the road, silenced and unable even to groan. Nonlethal, tactical weapon-like powers…!

"#WhyAreyou #BeingMeanToMe?"

Trembling—

Mommy Smartphone clasped the device connected to her right hand, her symbol, as she trembled, looking up at the boy. "#WhenI #JustWantTo #See #Yuu #MyFamily!!"

"That's causing a hell of a lot of problems… I hope this will actually work, Boss!"

Reiji was still skeptical. The viral smartphone Phantasm didn't have any direct combat capabilities, with physical attacks being its weakness in folklore.

You could defeat it by hitting and kicking—it was far less resilient than the rag wringer and the dead doll they'd fought before. But that wasn't the essence of this Phantasm—the reason that it was classified as dangerous enough that it could even destroy the world.

Its Phantasm pollution would cloud your sight. The Phantasm multiplied through text, and just beating this monster in a fight wasn't enough to deal with that.

So Reiji followed the other secret strategy he'd gotten from Narasaki: the logic of dispelling a curse via information.

Reiji rolled up the sleeve of the woman he'd captured.

He pressed the syringe against her slim and soft upper arm.

"#Ah #Gah #Huh? #I #I #I… #I…am #break #ing?!"

"You're not going to break. You're just going back. This is Human Tonic—half a portion."

Just doing away with her powers wouldn't need any fine-tuning.

The liquid drug he injected made her blood vessels pop out.

It crawled up her upper arm, going from her heart up her neck, and when it reached her brain, the look in her eyes changed.

Her face went pale, her jaw trembled, her eyes and mouth opened as far as they would go as if she were ruminating on what she had done. This woman, who most likely was supposed to have been an ordinary housewife, experienced unbearable despair.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!

"I…I!! I never…I never meant! I never meant to!!

"I didn't want him to throw me away! I was scared for Yuu's friends at school, for a girl in his class, to take him from me! I wanted him to have only eyes for me. That's all! For him to love me!!"

"Deal with that sort of thing at home," Reiji said, looking at the miserable battlefield, with the woman writhing in anguish before him. "This is what you've done. This is what you and your stepson have done.

"The Tonic isn't the only reason this happened—it just exposed your hearts. Don't be broken. Don't run away. Fulfill your responsibility. You're a mother, aren't you?"

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!"

Catching hold of the housewife as she shook her head with tears, sobs, and snot, he caught her by the chin and brought his mouth to her ear.

He bit the earlobe by her messed-up face to hold her in place as he pronounced, "I'll give you your last moments. Cry out how you

feel.”

“My…feelings?”

“Yes. Post them to social media. Communicate your feelings toward your son. You don’t need the Tonic. You should have done this yourself right from the start.”

“Ah… Ahhhhhhhh… Ahhhhhhhhhhh…!”

Trembling, she tapped on the phone connected to her right hand.

The root of flesh connected to it had withered and wilted away. However, the Phantasms that received those feelings, that spirit, would use that power to spread her will far and wide and to go viral.

The touchscreen blinked, and the app launched. Social media was supposed to be down, but under Narasaki’s orders, Neru had already prepared everything.

——**“I’m sorry.”**

Her grief and apology would infect through the text.

“I have committed a crime. Even though I’m a mother—even though that’s what I wanted to be.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be that. I fell for him—regrettably. I thought he would love me. I wanted to be loved.”

Exposed on social media, the Phantasm’s power made her will go incredibly viral.

Moments after public social media was restored, it leaped up to the top of all citizens’ timelines. They didn’t know what was going on. There was no explanation. Only sadness, only the cry of their sins was transmitted.

“You’ve done wrong, Yuu.

“It’s my fault. It’s because I hurt you and constrained you and pushed you to it.

“I may not be able to atone for it my whole life, but even

so, if it's possible—
"Please, please—
"Please ~~forgive us…~~"

There was a moment's lag—
And the words she'd posted were overwritten in real time…

*

The glass cylinder had a thin layer of dust.

On the outskirts of Otaku Road in the Masquerade, in the basement of the Fantastic Sweeper Office building—

The object, connected to the optical cable from before the had been designated a special district, lay under a cover that blocked out its pale blue light.

Inside the cylinder was a school of medaka fish swimming around in blue liquid like a reproduction of the primordial soup—but if you looked closely, they were not fish. They had arms, legs, tails, and swelled, developed brains.

Their skin was pink. Grotesque creatures, rather like axolotls with enlarged brains, they looked like babies. This was the Aquatic Colonial Organism Neuro-Unit: Franken Babies.

Plastered with the Beast Tech logo, this was on loan from head office. It was an electronic warfare asset loaned to them to help manage the Masquerade, and from this lawless district, it could hack into any terminal that existed in Akitsushima.

Here where there was no law, regulations against hacking and forbidding illegal access were meaningless. But this was a digital strategic weapon that was even more powerful than that—its use limited to BT headquarters only.

The dark web and deep web were in effect operated by megacorps, but in the event of an emergency, this could electronically interfere with virtually any electronic communication network and all its derivatives—and now he ran it.

Vmmm…!

The tank vibrated with a low-register sound like bees' wings.

The Franken Babies that swam within had been conceived about thirty-two to thirty-eight days ago.

They were artificial humans supplied for experimentation, made by the conjoining of no-cost genes with all rights abandoned.

The evolutionary process from fish to reptile to mammal had been stopped partway, with all that pure life force converted into colonial artificial intelligence. This base, turned into an AI engine, sent information to the entrusted management console.

——Interfering with public social media servers. Uploading of Phantasm-corrupted information confirmed.

——Observing editing of post content by fellow electronic warfare type.

——Failure. Retrying. Reattempting until success. Success after one trillion seventy-four million attempts.

——Amending seven characters of uploaded text.

——Erasing *forgive us.*

——Inserting *forget us.*

Directly above where these records, that tank lay—

On the roof of the Fantastic Sweeper office building, a man stood at the top of the old emergency stairs, his secretary at his side.

With a gentle vibration, it arrived on the tablet she held.

Information suppression via Phantasm corruption has been executed.

Accounts related to the viral smartphone will be erased as dissemination completes.

Related memories of all citizens with public social media access will be deleted.

Mental care and AI diagnosis notices will be sent to the relevant citizens.

Those who proactively see a doctor will be designated

social order contribution level B, credit score +25.

Diagnosis is not obligatory, but those who refuse will be penalized.

You have achieved social order contribution level S.

Social credit score of related subsidiary company Fantastic Sweeper +100,000."

From Head Office Inspection Department to the Franken Babies Entrusted Management Console:

Emergency dispatch order requested.

With a bored look at the tablet, she said—

"Success. That was easy… Not. It was pretty darn tough."

"I'm sure. Nice work, Neru. I'll treat you to something later. How about some cucumber sushi?"

"I want pancakes. Triple berry with whipped cream and lots of honey and maple syrup."

"Just hearing that is making my blood sugar levels spike. Well, that's fine—just barely."

The chaos over, President Narasaki looked down at the ground—and the secretary at his side, Neru Hoozuki.

The people restrained by Reiji's Secret White Technique were now cocoons lying in the street.

There were dozens—maybe a hundred—and all of them had their eyes, noses, and mouths covered by foul-smelling threads and were unconscious. After checking over all this with his decorated opera glasses, Narasaki gave his secretary the signal.

"Send the go sign. Approve the emergency dispatch and begin city cleaning."

"Got it." With that brief reply, her fingers danced on the touchscreen.

The order from Neru caused big activity on the scene.

The clusters of high-rise buildings were like the strange giant trees that grow thick in tropical rainforests, with shanties packed into

every crevice. The nighttime city of ruin was a mix of abandoned buildings and life, and deep within was a massive piece of architecture that blossomed like a flower that never bore fruit.

It was the Natsukibara head office building for Beast Tech, the management and administration of the Masquerade.

"We got the go sign! We're starting the operation, lads!!"

"Medical team, quarantine team, containment team, hurry. Retrieve all the cocoons and take the Beastpeople into custody!!"

Lines of trailers rushed out onto the street one after another. The origin point of the panic—the Natsukibara Station area and Otaku Road—were completely blocked off, with powerful searchlights illuminating the streets and workers in overalls pouring out of vehicles.

They were all Beastpeople who had taken the Tonic. Wearing gas masks that enclosed their heads of various animal shapes, they retrieved the cocoon balls that lay on the street one after another, cramming them into the ambulances that followed.

"This is Masquerade management. Due to a state of emergency, we are enacting a temporary lockdown," came the clear-voiced announcement.

"A riot has occurred due to panic from a gas leak accident. We are currently engaged in relief activity. We ask for everyone's cooperation. I repeat—"

The Beastpeople who came out of the trailers deployed military-use temporary fencing, holding back the cars and the rubberneckers.

Warning lights glared, while red lights waved by the laborers working on cordoning things off flickered all over.

"What a mess. Even if with the emergency dispatch order, borrowing personnel and equipment from head office is expensive," Narasaki muttered while leaning his chin on his hand on the rusty fence, looking down at the night city that looked like a strange starry sky. "But we did do the job. Reiji did well, right up at the last minute. And getting a hundred thousand credit score points for the company will blow us out of the red and put us way into the black. I could get him a used phone."

"You should get him a new one," said Neru. "He worked hard

enough, didn't he?"

"I suppose? But well, it will be more valuable for him to get his wish after some struggle rather than having it come true so quickly. Struggling in the process to gain something builds a personal narrative for it."

You could make an instant purchase in two seconds by clicking on a shopping site.

Or you could get something as a reward after accomplishing a tough job—the results were the same.

But there was value in that process, he said, the journey on the way to that result, in expending effort that could be called pointless.

"Step by step, they're climbing the stairs that lead to becoming 'normal human beings.' I'd very much like them to take firm steps on each stair as they go. That will make it all the more impressive to me down the line."

"It just feels like you're making them struggle pointlessly."

"Not at all. It'd be pointless for me to do it, but when young people do it, it's called *youth*, Neru." He turned around with a silly gesture.

Neru's vague look caught him.

Her glass eyes seemed to be saying she couldn't understand—it made no sense to her.

"Perhaps a fake human like yourself wouldn't understand? Miss Frankenstein," he said.

"An old name. Moldy. It's declined in subscription."

"Perhaps. From the gothic novel written in the nineteenth century, about sewing together human corpses and jolting them with electricity to revive them, came the newest Mythic Beast, created from a monster made by a mad scientist and his story."

Myth, folklore, rumor.

Supernatural phenomenon due to human consciousness, concentrated through the medium of stories, mysticality.

In the threshold between the Mythics of the distant past and the Phantasms born of modern urban legends, conspiracy theories, and rumors—

"There is us," said Neru Hoozuki—the Franken Babies

management console. “A temporary person named by AI. A child and an adult, but could be either. We are a group, a series product that operates connectively, just like the copy machines of the old days and houseplants.”

“In terms of social position, they mean the same thing. Frankly speaking, you’re not much different from Reiji and Getsu, who are treated like animals and doing some legal acrobatics, as pets kept by the company.”

She was equipment sent to the company as an inanimate object, a thing.

Meanwhile, the Special Permanent Beasts had been entrusted to them as sentient animals and were slowly trying to rise to the position of human.

“Personally, I think you can do the same thing,” said Narasaki. “There’s too much of an age gap here for an office romance, so why not enjoy your youth in a different form?” He gave her a dubious smile.

“…Youth?” Just like a myna bird that couldn’t recognize human voices, the secretary Neru tilted her head innocently.

“Mind your own business.”

She made a face at him but was otherwise expressionless.

Pulling down her lower eyelid with her finger and sticking out her little tongue, she said, “I’m not falling for that. I am your subordinate, equipment, and a terminal that monitors you.”

“I know that,” said Narasaki. “But you gave your tacit approval of our investigation into the murder of the hit-and-run centaur, Mai Ikeda’s family, and didn’t report it to head office. Now why is that—could it be that you like me?”

“So obnoxious. I am the equipment of the inspection department. In the case that there is wrongdoing or acts of illegal concealment within BT head office, pursuing that is part of my job. In other words, our interests match.”

“It’s so cute how your tone sometimes becomes so childlike. ‘Our

interests match.’ How wonderful!”

Narasaki’s bright and dubious smile grew wider, and he touched his finger to Neru’s chest.

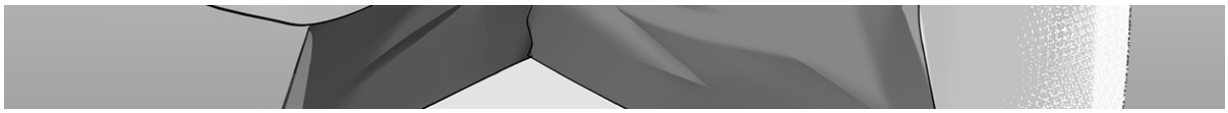
That spot, covered by her white blouse, was not warm—it was hard, like a corpse.

“You touched female staff without permission. I’m reducing your credit score for sexual harassment.”

“I wasn’t trying to play the touch-the-nipple game or something, so cut me a break. Now then.”

Casually dodging her fairly serious warning, Narasaki touched the finger that he’d thrust at her heart to her forehead.





“The Aquatic Colonial Organism Neuro-Unit in that tank—the growth-stunted fetuses. That brain is what you’re named after.”

She was just like a PC, digital assistant, or smartphone connected wirelessly to a local network.

If Neru Hoozuki was a smartphone that could move independently and interact with humans, carrying out support as they demanded, then the underground colony brain was her main body. Each individual swimming fetus had extremely advanced operations capacity and loyalty toward the inspection department at head office.

A slave, tied with invisible chains, and her group. “You’re just like Mommy Smartphone—a tactical nuke in an information society. If you were Phantasms, you would be instantly designated class red. Being installed here in this lawless district, there are no legal powers to restrain you, and if needed, you could even quite easily break into foreign intelligence organizations or weapons management systems.”

“I could. Though I won’t.”

“I’m sure. Just like them.”

The werewolf who was sleeping right now in the office on the floor below, having wrung out his whole soul—

And the Brocken in a back alley just a little ways away, who had again burned his humanity up almost to nothingness and was delivering the culprit he’d caught to an ambulance. And the cocktail witch who was watching over him anxiously as he was ready to collapse—

“They’re all monsters who could destroy the world if they wanted to. But they try to be human and resist the mystical folklore that lies at their roots. Why is that? It would be far more liberating just to be a monster. I’m sure it would be quite exhilarating to rampage, go crazy, and destroy as you pleased! But in spite of it all!”

He really loves the sound of his own voice, the secretary thought in exasperation but didn’t let it show on her face or in her voice. “Who knows? Maybe because it’s more fun to be human?”

“Yes, that’s it,” he said. “They choose a life of discomfort as humans over the pleasure of being a monster.

“That is to say, they are both monster and man, and they are

reliant on being that way—they're humanholics."

The "monsterholic" humans took Monster Tonic every night and gathered in the lawless district—

While the "humanholic" monsters paid for Human Tonic, knowing it would cause discomfort, and sought control.

"I give them an opportunity to show off what they can do, and as compensation, they work for me at a low salary—it's truly a win-win. I make money, and they're saved, and you get recognition while we're at it. Everyone is happy!"

"Happy… Happiness. Sweets?"

"Is that everything for you? I'll give you some paid leave later, so go have fun with some other youngsters." There was no teasing ring in his voice. He sounded rather gentle and earnest.

"Life—youth—"

"They may feel like a hassle, but they're fun once you experience them, you know?"

Ringing announcements, flashing warning lights.

Looking down at the vortex of chaos as it was rapidly regaining order, Narasaki smiled like a loving father.

*

"They said there's gonna be an online full school assembly next week. Wanna skip it?" Mei asked.

"No…I'm going," Reiji replied.

They were at the station closest to Akanebara High School, on the Kyoto Kanjou line.

"These deaths could have been prevented if we'd been a little faster. I'll mourn them, at least."

"Aren't you thinking about it too much? I feel like you guys did pretty good."

Having finished repairs, the main traffic routes of the city continued on as before, carrying people wearing crowd masks.

There remained a modest gap to the side of the train platform, with just enough space for a few young people to hang out there with a spot for each person—just enough room between them to avoid a personal distance warning.

It must have been a smoking area in the old days. The glass box was to the side of the platform, where it wouldn't block passage, and had the faint lingering smell of tar from years gone by. There, Reiji Kasumi and Mei Mezuki exchanged dispirited looks as they chatted.

"The track club peeps were all safe. Some tried to go to Natsukibara, and some actually went, but the trains were stopped… and that thing happened before they arrived."

"The social media memory blockade," said Reiji. "What a reckless thing for the boss to do. Ugh."

A few days earlier—

The Natsukibara Station area gas leak, the emergency announcement, and the official social media servers going down had caused major confusion.

The Kanjou line being at a stop for half a day had a negative influence on population flow and logistics.

As for the mysterious trend that had occurred around that time, #freethebeast, nobody spoke of it anymore. Plus, the abnormal behavior that had accompanied it, as well as the confusion and rioting in the Masquerade, had vanished from official news.

The official death toll among Akanebara Municipal High School's students was three.

There were many dead, injured, and missing due to the riots. Even if only three of their students had been lost, they were saying that they would be having an online school assembly to settle the upset among the students and to express their mourning.

"How did your boss stop that internet curse attack in the end?" asked Mei.

"Do you have to phrase it like that…? It was basically a threat to the whole world."

"But getting all freaked out about that isn't going to help. You whacked the main body to beat it, right? So then that works."

"No, it doesn't… We didn't defeat it. It's apparently not something you can defeat."

#freethebeast, which the first viral smartphone had disseminated on social media and messaging apps—

That message, which had caused people to lose their heads and gather in the Masquerade, couldn't be erased.

They had forced a temporary stop by taking social media servers down, but even after deleting the culprit's whole account—even if the posted message was never seen—so long as the infected existed, it would just be posted again.

"And then there was the second viral smartphone," Reiji said, "the aforementioned Mommy Smartphone."

"I heard. It sounded pretty lurid."

"I never thought I was naive and starry-eyed about romance, but that was on another level. I think I'll have nightmares about that."

After being apprehended and injecting her with a half-dose of Human Tonic, Reiji had guided the woman to post a message.

"'Please forgive us'… Huh. Selfish until the end," said Mei.

"You think? Isn't that obvious for any human? Desire for approval and self-preservation."

"Maybe. But after all she got away with, saying, 'I apologized, so please forgive me,' is pretty stupid. If you're gonna pull that, then it's like don't do it to begin with."

"You're right, but if she'd been that rational, the problem never would have started in the first place."

If the message she'd posted had been left as-is, it would have disseminated as information pollution number two.

All humanity that connected to social media and saw it would have done as she wished and forgiven everything they had done—people would have forgiven all the offenses that the culprits had committed and then wound up as Phantasms.

They wouldn't even have to do anything about it—there would be no need.

Since they would be *forgiven.*

"…Shouldn't you have at least given that woman one good thwack?"

"Hitting her would be no use. It would change nothing," Reiji replied curtly to Mei as she shadowboxed from her wheelchair.

But anyway, the message had been posted, and it had been instantly rewritten.

"I don't know how they did it," said Reiji. "Apparently, Neru and head office did it on the boss's request."

A revision of just a few letters—from "forgive us" to "forget us."

It would have been impossible had she not been injected with Human Tonic and weakened—it would have been re-revised by her own will. But she had been prevented from that, and as a result, a new order had disseminated far and wide, with no one to obstruct it.

"There are now only a handful of people who remember the two people who became viral smartphones," said Reiji. "People who weren't on social media at the time of the incident—the people in the Masquerade at the time. Aside from them, just about all memories were dealt with, and with that order complete, the second post was also deleted, and the source of the infection eradicated."

Already, Yuuichi Kitajima and his stepmother had been handed over to BT head office.

Due to the aftereffects of Phantasm Tonic, they basically had no hope of recovery. Additionally, information had been manipulated to erase their existence, and they were no longer treated as people. They would likely be sent to the facility where Reiji and Getsu had once been.

"What sort of detention center? Do they torture them and stuff then?" Mei asked.

"Sometimes. There's a department at Beast Tech that does research on Phantasms and Mythic Beasts. They'll be confined until they die as research subjects. It's a lot worse than being in a normal prison."

"…I meant that as a joke, though."

"Unfortunately, this is no joke. They wanted to be beasts, and they're getting their wish."

Even if Yuuichi Kitajima had been born into a twisted

environment, his family had been wealthy—

Surely there could have been many opportunities to improve things, but it had all gone to waste.

No matter how he thought about it, Reiji would never understand the feelings of a human who wished intentionally to become a beast.

"I'm sure Yuuichi Kitajima's father will suffer now," he said. "The medical corporation that he manages has been accused of tax evasion, and their credit score has plummeted. The boss didn't say anything, but that must be a penalty from head office."

"He was stinking rich, wasn't he? Will this ruin him?"

"At the very least, he'll be removed from management. What comes after that isn't our job." He paused there as they were interrupted by loud footsteps.

"Sorry I'm a bit late! But look, look, Reiji! I've got the goods we've been waiting for!"

"Don't talk about it like it's some dangerous product. It's just a smartphone."

The boy and girl who came into the old smoking space were Getsu Raisan and Kei Kakiba.

The smartphones that he proudly held up seemed like worn-out used models. But Getsu's eyes were sparkling, carefully wiping the dirt off the touchscreen as he gazed at it.

"Who woulda thought the time would come for us to get smartphones…?" he said. "So how d'you use these things?"

"Don't ask me," said Reiji. "Frankly, I don't feel like I can use one properly. Was the money from the boss enough?"

"Just barely. It was a good thing Kei brought a coupon."

"I often go to the used shop," she explained. "…They're fairly old models, but they said the battery is new."

That was the special bonus they'd received from their boss, Narasaki—permission to own smartphones.

They had finally switched over from their old flip phones that had barely even gotten a signal. They had opposite concerns when shopping: Reiji had chosen a model from the store inventory with a long battery life that could read e-books and make electronic payments, while Getsu had worried so much about design, color, and

shape you'd think he'd break into a fever.

"You were seriously worried about which to choose, that or a kids' phone for little girls," Kei teased.

"I thought about it, but I figured I shouldn't buy that with the boss's money. I'll buy it myself."

"You're trying to act cool about it, but that's a prop for roleplaying as a little girl, isn't it?" Mei shot him a cold look diagonally from below, and he made an awkward face.

Though Reiji had waffled about it, he'd made his decision before Getsu, then had gone to the rest area with Mei. They hadn't gone to any cafés or anything like that.

It was simply to save money. Obviously, he was still not wealthy enough that he could casually buy himself a drink.

"Wow, this thing is so cool, Reiji!" Getsu crowed. "Look, look, the resolution is different. It's so clear!"

"I can't tell the difference," Reiji sighed. "…I find social media tedious. But since we got permission, I have no choice. Actually, Getsu. Stop downloading *gacha* games. You don't have the money for microtransactions."

"I'm doing it free-to-play! I swear I won't spend any money, so let me do it. I really wanted to! Everyone's doing it, so I want something to talk about with the kids in class!"

"…Well, maybe there's no helping it if it's to keep up. But don't spend money."

As they were having that conversation, a little ways away, Mei and Kei looked at each other and giggled.

"They sound like a dumb kid and a stubborn mom," said Mei. "What a weird relationship they have."

"Yes, but…I think it's warm. If I could compare it to something…" Putting a finger to her pretty lips with a *hmm*, Kei fell silent for a while. "It's like watching a fluffy little dog pester someone."

"A dog? …Well, one of them is a canine, so it's accurate."

With the four of them in the small former smoking area, the space like a transparent glass cage was full, so no new people came in since it would create personal distance issues.

It felt rather like a hideaway as the four of them chatted for a

while.

"Oh yeah. Since you've managed to get smartphones, download some messaging apps," said Mei.

"…!" Reiji reacted with surprise. "I need that. I'll buy some stamps, the sort little girls would like."

"I think it's creepy that your standard for evaluation is little girls, Kasumi… This one?" asked Kei.

"Ah, I connected. I got the messaging app! Huh…? I got an invitation," said Getsu.

"It's me, me, me. I made a group. I'll invite you, so join it," said Mei.

There was the faint ding of arriving messages. Getting the invitations sent all at once, a group chat got set up.

——**Team Punching Assholes (4)**
Warning: the group name may be seen by many people.

"…Such violent sensibilities. No other ideas, Mei?" asked Reiji.

"I'd make it like this," said Kei.

——**Best Friends (4)**

"Are you in kindergarten?" Mei said.

"But that kinda makes me happy. 'Best friends.' Why not?" said Getsu.

"…I'm not so sure about making it like a kindergarten playgroup when we're in high school…," said Reiji.

"Hold on, this doesn't sound gutsy enough," said Mei. "Make it sound like, stronger."

"A group chat name doesn't need to be a show of strength. And like…," Getsu chuckled, gazing gently at the name of the just-made group chat. "This is the first time we've ever been in something like this. I'm real glad."

"Yeah… Thanks, Mei," said Reiji.

The openhearted thanks from the boys made her flush a little.

"It's not like it was to please you or anything. It's just inconvenient not to have anything to get us together when we're hanging out or walking together. That's all, that's all!"

"Your face is red, Mei. Are you shy?" asked Kei.

"Don't point that out so coolly! It makes me look weak!"

"The mentality of trying to be strong in any situation is pretty amazing in a way," said Getsu.

"Maybe I'll let you respect me for that. Well, you're all interesting peeps," said Mei.

Reiji chuckled, and it spread to the friends around him.

The laughter relieved their tension, contagious, and with this new connection they'd acquired—

"Ultimately, you're keeping on investigating those bastards, right? You found any clues?" asked Mei.

"We still don't know anything right now," said Getsu. "Though I think we got rid of all the dangerous Tonic that was leaked."

"…The investigation will continue," said Reiji. "We still have lots of questions."

Like for example, where the hundred million the dead doll stole went, or about the real estate in the Masquerade.

The title deed still had yet to be found, and once classes were over, the two of them were going to look for it.

"At the very least, it's clear that one of the title deeds went to the string-puller," said Reiji. "It's also possible that he will show up. And unfortunately, it seems strange rumors about the hundred million are going around."

"Huh? What do you mean?" asked Mei.

"Before they died, the gangsters who were killed by the dead doll went around bragging that they were going to get a lot of money. Ultimately, it's unknown whether it was them or the dead doll who hid the money, but it will certainly be in the area around the ruined building where the murders were."

The casino staff who'd had the money stolen had admitted how much it was.

And even the fact that the people who seemed to have stolen it had been wiped out had turned into a rumor spreading around—

“It seems like we’ll get a dramatic treasure hunt at this rate,” said Reiji. “It’s definitely going to be a hassle.”

“I hope we find it soon, though…,” said Getsu.

Thinking about all the trouble that was waiting for them, the two of them gave each other fed-up looks.

“But with such a big fiasco, head office will probably get serious about investigating, too,” Reiji added.

Pursuit would intensify, they would chase the string-puller, and in this ultra-controlled society, there would certainly be footprints to follow.

“We’re going to find him,” said Getsu. “For the money, but also for you, Mei—and the victims, and for ourselves.”

*

At the same day and the same time, in a certain section of the Masquerade.

Pieces thudded down—the broken remains of all sorts of creatures in various shapes.

Birds: feathers of various colors, bones, even taxidermy. A mountain that seemed to have been snatched from a museum shelf went to the bottom of a cauldron.

Fish: with a pungent and fishy stench. Whole fish that basically hadn’t been processed at all, small to large, atop the birds.

Beasts: From raw mystery meat to processed pelts, it was all laid atop the fish, covering it.

Insects: a whole container that made gross rustling sounds was upturned to squirm there restlessly.

The next thing to be tossed out—raw scraps, with shreds of clothing and acrylic nails still on them.

They were the gathered pieces of human bodies, all the various bits that made up a person—corpses.

There were disgusting cockroaches on the walls, likely drawn by the smell that hung over it all. Black and brown rats pursued them—

never showing themselves, but they could be heard skittering around in the corners on the floor and in the ceiling.

It was an old shanty hut. The hut was erected between two tall buildings, completely hidden in the cracks of the great metropolis, surrounded by high-rises on all sides. It had been a members-only bar back before this place had been a lawless district.

In the past, select clientele—wealthy people, landowners, company presidents, and celebrities—had given orders to a certain person, entrusting him with the management of this building, but the rights to the property had been stolen by the son who was supposed to inherit it.

It had passed into the hands of a certain faction and was becoming the setting for a strange conspiracy.

"We were conveniently able to gain a base of operations. Useful indeed. That great rabbit who was slain was an influential man in the city underbelly. It seemed he even surreptitiously possessed a refuge like this, away from prying eyes."

"Worth one valuable vial of the panacea? Well, that's no matter, but this odor… Can anything be done about it?"

Behind the bar counter—

The mountain of various corpses heaped into the cauldron was placed on a gas stove for cooking. Food preservatives, rotting flesh and blood, and even chemical substances excreted by insects were mixed in, giving it a nose-wrinkling stench.

With the black silk sleeves of his traditional attire tied back by a *tasuki*, he wore a *kappogi* apron on top. The domestic look clashed with his otherworldly appearance. The figure cheerily tossed ingredients into the pot as the child who faced him over the counter pinched his nose.

He was dressed in the attire of a boy who served nobility in ancient times.

In *hakama* pants gathered at the ankle and a *suikan* robe, a costume never seen in the modern day, the boy expressed as much displeasure as he could on his pretty face, looking quite dissatisfied with and not touching his modest snack of stewed food with a pinch of salt and a cup of sake.

“What plot ye now? Investing all the money we earned through that dark auction, Devotee of the Seven Treasures?” asked the boy.

“Ahh, ’twas a convenience in these modern times. Once I learned how to wield a ‘smartphone’ and gain entry into the web of depths… acquiring specimens of even long-extinct rare creatures has been no bother.”

The man in black was the figure who had just been called Devotee of the Seven Treasures—

Face covered with cloth like a stagehand, he said evasively, “Various types of life and natural medicinal herbs. Man, bird, fish, beast, and insect, gathered from all over the world along with various medicines—”

“This rotten broth?” The child covered his nose with a sleeve.

“Exactly so. The Tonic we stole from BT headquarters has run out, however…” The figure pulled a little bottle from his bulging sleeve and showed it to him.

Inside the plain flask, the silver liquid that sloshed was like melted metal. It resembled mercury but was no such common substance, rippling as it emitted a mysterious pale light.

He popped off the rubber stopper with his thumb and poured the contents into the cauldron.

Szzzz!!

“Ohhh?!”

“Worry not,” said the figure. “While there may be some odor, ’tis harmless.”

“Fool, I shall choke and perish! What are you doing? What is that strange broth?”

“Rejuvenating water, a miracle drug, nostrum. ’Tis the panacea told of in many myths and legends that heals all ailments and extends life—the undiluted version of the high-grade Mythic Tonic in safekeeping at BT headquarters.”

“?!”

Inside the cauldron, meat dissolved, feathers crumbled, fish

boiled, and insects drowned, all mixed together.

In the blink of an eye, the silver fluid turned a color like mud, emitting an intense stench as it was stirred round and round with the common cooking ladle until all the ingredients were completely melted.

"Take the raw material for the Monster Tonic circulated in this town, respectfully dissolve the fur, scales, and pelts of the catalyst creatures into it, and my, how mysterious. It makes Monster Tonic, which transforms one into that creature at will."

"So then…that!! That silver fluid is…the elixir!" The child leaned forward over the counter, heedless of the stench as he gazed into the bubbling cauldron. "It cannot be… Hadn't we lost the recipe?!"

"It was obtained from the production department at Beast Tech. I believe it likely the witch has revived."

"The miracle drug, secretly passed down by the Taoist immortals of Kunlun and the witches of the West, said to have been lost after the battle over the mysticality of immortality… Well then, the ingredients in that rotten pot are types of catalyst?"

"Indeed. By dissolving all types of life in the world, the silver base will adapt to any form of life, becoming Monster Tonic. Then one need only add a shred of the monster one wishes to transform into."

A soup with all forms of life dissolved into it—the main ingredient for Monster Tonic.

"What foolishness, what foolishness indeed! To use a valuable base as a toy for the vulgar masses!"

"We must, or 'twill be but a dream to overthrow the mysticality of this country and to destroy Beast Tech's dominance." Easily shrugging off the child's overflowing wrath, the figure in black laughed in celebration. "The creations of the Phantasms and Mythics scattered in this town are numerous. Now, watch the finishing touches. A true Tonic, far superior to the products of Beast Tech. All shall seek it."

"This stinking water… 'Tis just like *doburoku*, unrefined sake."

"Heh-heh, that is very well. The mysticality of this elixir, which changes one into the beast of choice when a drop is dissolved into the ingredients, is what distinguishes the ancient art from the

industrial product of Beast Tech."

Even though it produced the same effects, the main Beast Tech factory was very hygienically systematized.

The raw materials, the components from animals, were all finely pulverized, taking only the extract. It was mixed with the base, and after flavoring to balance the taste, preservatives, caffeine, and more were added, it was fine-tuned as a drink.

But this dosing method from the ancient past took no such considerations.

"One could say it's just like the unrefined sake brewed by the master brewers in ancient times," said the figure with a chuckle in his voice as he scooped up the viscous broth from the pot, pouring it into a little Japanese teacup.

Then he picked up something with long cooking chopsticks. It was a black cockroach that had appeared, drawn by the smell. It struggled in his chopsticks…and he just tossed it—

"Ergk!"

Ignoring the child's clear disgust, he tossed it into the teacup in his hand.

There was instantly the sound of popping bubbles. The insect lost its shape and dissolved, and the broth turned into a brownish black.

It smelled oily like margarine, and when he put the broth on a piece of biscuit, a typical bar snack, it became soft and wet like wheat bran.

"You can't mean to eat that…," said the boy.

"Not at all. Is this not fine enough to test?"

He tossed the biscuit with the broth on it from his right hand toward the skittering around the kitchen.

Many rats, impatient for food, crowded together to devour it.

"…Squeeeeeeeeeak!"

"Ohhh…?!"

On eating the pieces of the food, instantly, there was the crack of bones breaking and flesh tearing.

They were rearranged into a mix of rat and cockroach.

"The efficacy is as you can see."

The vermin were both animal and insect, shaped like rats with

insect wings and hard shells with fur. Spraying broth that looked like saliva from their pointed mouths, they ran around, flailing like they were worked up.

The boy's eyes were wide, looking at the disgusting sight, as the figure watched with deep interest.

"If the ignorant masses were to have it, they would surely enjoy themselves trying it out. Beasts, bugs, birds, fish, and the like. One can only imagine what kind of unknown recipes would be created after the cross-fertilization of two or three types."

"…Repulsive. Would you put on the nightly parade of a hundred demons of myth, with all manner of monstrous living beasts, birds, fish, and insects?"

"I feel it would be good if it disturbed this town, the crucible of the great witches' banquet."

Before the entirely exasperated boy, cloudy broth bubbled up in the hell cauldron that boiled hot.

If one were to give a name to this, what had to be enough raw material to dose hundreds of thousands of people with Monster Tonic—

"This crude drug, made up of three thousand three hundred and thirty-six ingredients, to combine it with that name… Let us name it Doburoku Thirty-Six."

The child made a disgusted look.

"…You have no talent for naming."

"Is that so?"

With that silly answer of feigned ignorance, the scheme to cause confusion and fear in the Masquerade quietly moved along.

Afterword

To everyone reading Monsterholic, hello. I am the author, Ghost Mikawa. Have you enjoyed the second volume of the overdose action unfolding in the town where people turn into beasts?

I laid out a tense plot this time, where the threat of the Phantasms is far greater than the previous book, and their trusty friends will likely be in danger. Please see for yourself if they can overcome these threats and trials.

These are the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Rag Miwano: Thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations in the second book as well. I especially like the painting on the cover of this book, and the vivid green is so stylish it made me want to put it on a spot on my shelf that stands out. The poisonous look fits Monsterholic, and Reiji and Kei look cool, and all this stands out on this piece that I very much adore. I will keep doing my best so that I can see you draw these characters so amazingly in the future, too. I will continue to count on you.

To Kameyo Kusono, the manga artist: I am very thankful that you are in charge of the Monsterholic manga adaptation. I have been enjoying all the storyboards and drawings that I'm sent as a reader, and I'm always amazed by the incredible expressiveness unique to manga. I'm hoping that you will increase enthusiasm for Monsterholic alongside me, so I will be continuing to count on you in the future.

To my editor Tabata, and M, who has been working with me since volume two: There were a lot of areas where I pressed the gas too hard in this book, and I'm very thankful that you put on the brakes for me. Just so that there's no misunderstanding for the readers,

putting on the brakes definitely made things more interesting and easier to read. My style will continue to be mashing the gas, so when that happens, please do hold the reins. I will continue to count on you as well.

To everyone who has been involved in the publication of this book: business, advertising, printing, distribution, sales, etcetera. Truly and honestly, thank you again. It's thanks to all of your work that I can continue to be a writer today. My gratitude.

And finally, to all the readers who have picked up this book. Truly, thank you, as always. Being someone who reads a lot of genres, it's hard for me to know what I want to do, but this hyperactivity is part of Mikawa, so I would be glad if you would watch me warmly, thinking that guy must be all over the place again. Whether *Monsterholic* continues to be published will be up to sales, so I can't really say, but so long as the publisher allows it I would like to keep writing it, so I hope that I will have your support.

——Well then, that's as far as this afterword goes. Let's meet again somewhere. This has been Ghost Mikawa.

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