**Tread Where Demons Play**

**Summary**

"Chuuya? What happened?"

“I saw somebody jumping off that building,” he gestured a hand vaguely in the direction of the scene “But there’s nobody.”

Chuuya reckoned on everything; that Dazai would shrug him off, that he would say he had imagined it, that he would try to distract him or that he would actually leave.

What he had not expected was a wide grin to spread on his face as his eyes lit up with joy, the other hand punching the air in victory.

“Finally!” Dazai beamed, “Finally I have found somebody!”

When Chuuya finds himself arrested once more, he gets an unusual offer. Never would he have thought that his view on the world would get turned upside down. In addition, his new working parter is ... a fellow of his own, to put it mildly.

And while he tries to find a place in this new situation, demons of the past and the present make sure to keep him on the edge.

GhostHunters!-AU
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Welcome to SKK-Ghosthunter AU
Have fun reading

Huge thank you to my friends who yelled at me to finish this project.

Trigger-warnings will be added when necessary

The old man did not only snore like a ship’s horn but also reeked of cheap liquor and something Chuuya could not allocate to anything. The best comparison he came up with was putrefaction; however, the man’s body seemed intact, aside from some minor bruises spreading on his skin. Though, who knew what hid under the layers of ripped shirts.

Chuuya had pulled the hem of his hoodie over his nose in an attempt to neutralize the stench and while it helped a little, the smell remained unbearable. With every breath he had to fight the urge to gag.

Impatiently, his eyes flickered to the watch on the wall, desperate to be released soon, only to note once again that it was stationary, and he came to the conclusion that a functioning clock posed a luxury the otherwise modern police station apparently couldn’t afford. It had already been broken the last two times Chuuya had been in there and nobody had cared to replace the battery yet, so it probably wouldn’t be happening in near future.

That didn’t stop him from hoping that it would miraculously start ticking again, because not knowing how long he had been stuck there made him go insane. How long had he already been locked up? Half an hour? More than one? It could have been fifteen minutes and he wouldn’t be able to tell. Time dragged in there, boredom a stable companion, especially when you were left alone with nothing but your own thoughts – and a snoring alcoholic.

He let his head fall back against the wall, uttering a frustrated groan as he crouched on the narrow bench. When would he finally be let out?

In response to the sound the man on the opposite bench stirred, his movements watched by Chuuya’s wary eyes. Judging by the odor, he guessed they locked him up to sober up, and Chuuya could not anticipate how he would react when he awoke. Although Chuuya surely wasn’t defenseless, his interest in picking a fight with an aggressive drunk in a police cell was rather limited. To him it was incomprehensible why they had put him into a cell with somebody else while the others were empty. If he had to make a guess he’d say that they probably wanted to annoy him as much as possible.

When the man quieted down anew, a relieved sigh escaped Chuuya. At least that was out of the way. Deciding that he had stared at blank walls and stanchions enough, his eyes fell shut and he allowed himself a moment of relaxation. There wasn’t much else to do besides listening to the
snores filling the otherwise devoid room.

Hours may have passed, he couldn’t tell, when finally the clattering sound of a key echoed from the other side of the door and the lock clicked open. In an instant he sat straight up, watching the officer who walked down the hallway closely, until he stopped in front of the bars of the cell.

“Hello Atsushi, nice to see you again. How have you been?” A cheeky grin played on Chuuya’s lips as he greeted the officer who shook his head in visible disapproval while fiddling with the keychain in order to find the fitting key.

“I sometimes feel like I see you more often than my friends, which is more than slightly concerning.”

Steady hands pushed the key into the lock of the cell, which resulted in the releasing click Chuuya had strived to hear. He jumped up onto his feet and didn’t do as much as cast a glance at the still asleep alcoholic.

“I know you grew quite fond of me; don’t pretend I am wrong.”

If he had wanted to, he could have easily pushed past the rookie, who blocked the exit as he stood in the frame, but Chuuya had pushed his luck enough for one day. Instead, he waited patiently for Atsushi to let him out whilst the officer tried to put on a serious look but failed to cover the smile at Chuuya’s comment.

“Just get out of here, Nakahara. Your friend is waiting for you outside.” He made a step to the side, clearing the way out of the prison for Chuuya, before locking the old man in the cell again.

Chuuya was well aware of Atsushi’s presence only a few steps behind him as they walked back into the main office, but he didn’t hesitate once as he strode through the building. He knew he wouldn’t be let out of sight until he crossed the doorstep to the street – for good reason.

Entering the office, several pair of eyes shot up to pin him down with their stares. As if he cared what they thought of him.

For the sake of getting on their nerves he plastered a smile on his face and offered a friendly wave.

“Hello everybody, have you missed me?” That alone sufficed to put them off, because the majority turned back to their paperwork, giving Chuuya the desired reaction.

He intended to leave the police department right away to get to his friend who supposedly had come to pick him up and he had almost reached the exit, when a familiar voice calling his name made him stop in his tracks. He turned on his heels and searched for the person who called for him but did nothing to hide the annoyance at having to spend even a second longer in there. His gloved hands slipped into the bag of his hoodie.

“What’s the matter Kunikida? Do you feel uncomfortable letting me go again?”

No acknowledgment followed.

“I would appreciate if we could talk for some minutes; I have a proposal for you,” Kunikida said.

A proposal? What could the commissioner possibly have to offer - especially to someone like him? Still, it sparked his interest. Such a request occurred once in a lifetime, letting it slip would be unacceptable.
Confident steps made their way to the office, Atsushi again closely behind him, which didn’t surprise him at all. Ever since Atsushi Nakajima had started working in the department, he apparently had been assigned as his personal guardian, since every single case Chuuya was involved in got handled by him. Although, he had no reason to complain because now issues got covered a lot faster and cleaner. Atsushi’s diligent working attitude made dealing with the police much easier.

As soon as he entered, Chuuya began examining the room. In all these years he had never been asked into this office. Taking in the furnishing, Chuuya quickly understood that Kunikida preferred an old-fashioned style that included shelves and chairs from the past century but still managed to be appropriate for present times. It didn’t fit in with the rest of the department at all, which had recently been modernized. He remembered being put into custody when the entire floor had been torn out and it had taken him almost an hour later that night getting his shoes dust free again.

The books Kunikida kept all dealt with topics around law and self-defense, all in all boring lecture. What really caught his attention were the numerous framed awards put up in a separate shelf.

The door clicked shut and Chuuya’s eyes snapped to Atsushi, who positioned himself next to the frame, facing him and hands clasped behind his back, his gaze giving away nothing to indicate the further course of the incoming conversation. Then he turned to Kunikida. The man sat at his desk, calmly turning the pages of his notebook. Chuuya has never seen him without that little notepad and he always had wondered what secrets he kept in there.

Before he could spend another thought on it, the commissioner cleared his throat and motioned Chuuya to sit down across him with one hand, not looking up from his notes.

He crossed the room swiftly and dropped onto the surprisingly comfortable chair with a huff, stretching his feet out under the desk. He had long discharged caring about manners in the police department.

Only after several seconds Kunikida cast his visitor a glance. The notebook was slammed shut and put aside, and with an index finger he pushed his glasses up the bridge of the nose. Chuuya watched intently.

“I have to admit, I didn’t expect you to show up here again so soon,” Kunikida said and at the accompanying sigh one of Chuuya’s eyebrows shot up.

“It’s not as if I am here by my own choice. It was your men’s decision to arrest me, again.”

Kunikida sighed again. “You do realize it is highly suspicious for someone to show up at so many crime scenes just at the right time. Many of them are convinced you are involved with the cases, of course they are going to take you into custody.”

Chuuya had already heard the almost exact statement the last time he had been picked up from Atsushi and slowly this became bothersome. His fingers dug into the fabric of his sweatshirt.

“Look, I will tell you the same I have told the officers last time. I don’t know how I manage to show up just in time. I simply follow the crowds and end up there. There’s no magic to it.”

“I would be more inclined to believe you if there were actual crowds at the crime scenes.” Sitting up straight, Kunikida rested his forearms on the desk as he clasped his hands, not once letting Chuuya out of sight.

“Your definition of ‘crowd’ seems to deviate from mine. I am not to blame.”
Somewhere behind him, Chuuya heard Atsushi shifting his weight, accompanied by metal clattering, presumably from the handcuffs tied to his side. The sound, way too familiar for his liking, unsettled him, although knowing that he wouldn’t be arrested a second time that night.

“Your most recent arrest happened two days ago. Last week we sighted you at three different crime scenes, the week before at two and in between you got in trouble for thievery five times.”

Despite trying to stay composed, Chuuya didn’t miss the wavering in Kunikida’s voice, indicating his anger. He truly was losing his patience.

Chuuya shrugged, pouting in disinterest, “Those were only minor incidents, little miscalculations of mine. As far as the murders are concerned, I am innocent. In no way I am connected to them.”

The chief held his gaze but his head slowly turned red. He needed a moment to answer, and due to the white color of his knuckles Chuuya assumed he had to calm himself down before doing so. The feeling of triumph settled in his chest. When the commissioner continued, he kept his voice steady without a trace of irrigation.

“Because you are smart enough to have somebody that keeps you out of trouble and our lack of evidence providing any ties between you and the murders or missing people, we cannot press charges against you. But you already know that. The reason I called you in is a proposition for you.”

“You mentioned. Keep talking.”

Kunikida’s brows furrowed at Chuuya giving him permission to speak, but he didn’t comment on it and continued with a stern tone.

“I have wondered why you continue that life-style of yours. It’s no secret that you are in no need for money and you have told us multiple times that you’re not doing this for somebody else. Therefore, I concluded you do it out of tedium.”

Taken aback by the truthfulness of the statement, Chuuya bit the inside of his lips in an effort to keep himself grounded. In the course of his lifespan several people have told him that he was easy to read, but having it presented in such a blunt way made his stomach drop, even though it probably shouldn’t. Kunikida was a cop nevertheless, his job required reading people. Still, it didn’t stop him from crossing his arms in front of his chest in defense.

“Even if that’s the case; why would you care? After all, I give you a job to do.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, it took Kunikida a moment to reply. “Bold of you to assume we have nothing else to do than keeping track of your shenanigans. If anything, they’re a nuisance.”

The comment clearly intended to attack him, but Chuuya didn’t as much as shrug.

“I still don’t see the point of us having this talk.”

That’s when Kunikida averted his gaze the first time during the conversation in order to skim through the pages of his notebook, until he pulled out a small piece of paper and slid it across the table, right in front of Chuuya, who leaned forward to inspect it; however, only a phone number was scrawled on it in a neat handwriting. Picking it up, he twisted the note between two fingers, checking the backside which turned out to be empty. He didn’t know what to make out of it.

“What should I do with that?”
“I know it shouldn’t be any of my concern, but for the sake of us both, hear me out. This is the phone number of an acquaintance of mine. He is not part of any governmental service, but he works in the field of crime and is currently in search for a partner.”

Chuuya realized what he aimed at.

“You want me to work with him.”

Kunikida nodded. “It would help every party. He would get the assistance he needs; you would spend your time usefully and our department could focus on the serial murderer with less interruptions.”

“How do you imagine that partnership to work out? He fights criminals, I am a criminal. This is destined to fail,” Chuuya remained doubtful.

“He doesn’t exactly hunt down criminals, his work is more complex.”

The sentence sounded practiced, which didn’t go unnoticed by Chuuya who tried to pry further.

“Just tell me what he does.”

“Call him and find out for yourself.”

This led nowhere. He had more important matters to handle than playing some stupid guessing game the head of the police department had decided to engage in, so he got up from the chair.

“I appreciate your effort, but hard pass. I don’t enjoy wasting my time. Thank you for your concern.”

The frustrated groan Kunikida uttered did nothing to change his opinion. For all he knew this might be a trap, trying to get him into some twisted situation in order to finally press charges against him.

Atsushi didn’t stop him when he exited the office but was on his heels at once. Chuuya didn’t pay attention to anyone around in the station; he only wanted to leave this place. As much fun riling up officers could be at times, he had enough for one day. Just before he could press down onto the handle, a hand was placed on his shoulder, which made him flinch more than he liked to admit. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he stared directly into Atsushi’s face, who held up the note with the phone number Chuuya had left on Kunikida’s desk.

“I know you don’t trust this entire story but believe me when I say the guy Kunikida talked about is a nice one, though a little odd at times. We are not playing tricks on you, the guy really needs a partner and I have a feeling you two could get along well.”

Chuuya’s gaze flickered back and forth between Nakajima and the note before he snatched it out of his hands.

“That was your idea, right?”

“I see you almost as often as my colleagues; I had a lot time to get to know you.”

Atsushi offered an apologetic smile. The boy had always been nice to him. No matter what Chuuya had done, he had never lied to him and maybe it was foolish, but Chuuya trusted him. Atsushi only ever had the best interests in mind. It convinced him to pocket the note.

“I will consider it.”
“Please call him, maybe even arrange a meeting. If you are not convinced by then, you are not obliged to see him ever again. Just... something is telling me this might be good for both of you.”

Uneasiness, mixed with remorse, spread in Chuuya’s stomach at the pleading look Atsushi gave him. Probably he had been giving them a particular hard time the last few weeks, with everything going on in the city currently, all these missing people and murders, and maybe some variety would do him good as well. The latest arrests had been less exciting than he had hoped for.

The nod he gave the young officer seemed to be enough of an answer, because he smiled at him proudly and let his hand slide off his shoulder, finally releasing him. He didn’t say anything else as he left the police station after what felt like an eternity.

Outside, the sun had already set and the street was illuminated by street lights, but the city appeared as alive as ever with pedestrians, tourists and groups of adolescents who planned on enjoying Portland’s night-life. Chuuya breathed in some fresh air, releasing the tension that had built up the past few hours.

He didn’t miss how everybody seemed to stay clear of the police building. Who could blame them? Normal people avoided dealing with the police and weren’t arrested voluntarily.

From the corner of his eyes he made out some movement when a person got up from a bench to approach him. The black coat lifted up behind him in the breeze of autumn.

“I waited almost an hour outside and guess what; it’s rather cold when you have nothing else to do than sitting around. How badly did you fuck up this time?”

A lopsided smile appeared on Chuuya’s lips when Akutagawa came to a halt next to him.

“Turns out I am more of a nuisance than expected. I would have been out sooner if Kunikida hadn’t pulled me aside.”

Two eyebrows shot up in surprise, amusing Chuuya quite a bit.

“Did you get the long overdue lecture? Because I don’t know how much longer I will be able to keep you out of trouble at this rate.”

“Perhaps you won’t have to anymore, for some time at least. I got a job offer.”

Before Akutagawa uttered his thoughts, Chuuya continued, so he shut his mouth. “It’s not for the cops, but a guy who... I don’t actually know what he does, but apparently they think I would be suited.”

“Are you taking it?”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

He ignored how skeptically Akutagawa mustered him and instead stretched his flat palm out. “I believe you still have something for me.”

“How could I forget?” The man crammed in one of the large pockets of the coat, until he found the searched object and let it drop into Chuuya’s hand. Fingers closed around the plastic card and it got stuffed into jean pockets.

“Thank you for taking care of it, I will give it back as soon as I need to,” Chuuya said.
“Nothing I didn’t already know. I’ll see you around.”

“Sure.”

With that, Akutagawa turned and disappeared in the crowds, leaving Chuuya alone, ready to go home at last.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
If you want to, let me know what you think in the comments.
Chapter 2

Chuuya internally cursed himself as he hurried down the main road. He had wasted almost fifteen minutes searching the café at the wrong place and had run down the street several times unsuccessfully before comparing the road sign to the address he had received yesterday.

The night prior he had lain awake in bed until late into the morning hours, contemplating if he should accept the offer and give the mysterious job he knew nothing about a try. At first he intended to decline and carry on with pickpocketing and bugging cops as he had gotten used to over the past years, but the next morning the note presented a heavy weight in his pocket. Its imprint on the jeans reminded him constantly of the proposition and it didn’t lessen his interest in the slightest. Contrary, his mind filled with hundreds of questions which he would be able to answer by simply calling the man. He might not trust Kunikida but he had confidence in Atsushi. If he said he would be suited, there had to be some truth to it.

In the evening his curiosity got the best of him and he dialed the number on his phone only to have his hope crushed mere seconds later. Of course nobody would pick up, why would anyone answer to an unknown caller? He had let his chance slip.

Angry at himself he threw the phone onto the couch and made a beeline to the fridge to open up a bottle of wine when the sound of a notification echoed through the flat. Chuuya grabbed it in an instant and unlocked the screen to a message from the number he had just called. It included a coffee shop’s address, tomorrow’s date, the time - which was way too early for him - and was signed with ‘Dazai’. As he read it, a second message followed.

“I’ll sit outdoors.”

No further information was attached, no question asked. Dazai appeared to know why he called and seemed to be convinced he would come. While it came across as odd, he was not mistaken. Chuuya would be there.

Now he finally turned into the correct street and from afar he could already make out a small, open garden with tables and chairs which must belong to the café Dazai had referred to. His assumptions were confirmed as soon as he read the sign ‘Lucy’s Dream Cup’, exactly as the message stated. The name sounded too cute for Chuuya’s liking although he wouldn’t judge its quality by that. He didn’t even come here for coffee in the first place.

Just before the meeting point he slowed down and walked the last bit to give his breathing some time to even out. Giving his phone a last glance before opening the gate to the garden, he noted
that he should have arrived ten minutes ago. Hopefully Dazai wouldn’t hold it against him and reject him right away.

Despite its location in the mid of a pedestrian area, the garden appeared to be its own world. Roses and ivy wreathed around the fence and flower boxes with red, pink and purple blossoms decorated the establishment. White, wooden furniture, taken right out a Victorian garden, topped everything off.

The flower’s sweet scent mixed with the smell of freshly brewed coffee and it soothed Chuuya’s nerves. To his surprise, the grass he stepped on was real and bent under his shoes easily.

His eyes scanned the seated people as he made his way through, searching for somebody that looked like a guy named Dazai. The man had given him no information on how he could recognize him, thus he had to guess.

Most of the visitors had come in company and were chatting in groups, so Chuuya ruled them out immediately and he also doubted that the middle aged woman turned out to be the person in question. For a short moment his gaze lingered on an elderly man who was sipping a cup of coffee all by himself, but discarded the thought a few seconds later. Him being Dazai seemed rather unlikely.

Then, in the last corner of the garden, he spotted someone close to his age, back turned to the street behind him and lost in a book whose cover Chuuya didn’t recognize.

Confident to have found his person, he walked up to him, apologizing to every customer he disturbed as he had to push past some of them more forcefully.

When he stopped in front of him, he set about introducing himself, but his opposite beat him to it, raising his gaze from behind his lecture with a wide smile on his lips.

“You found me!”

Chuuya didn’t know what to make out of the comment; therefore he simply asked “Are you Dazai?”

“The one and only,” Dazai responded and put down his book.

Chuuya cast a quick glance at the cover where the word ‘suicide’ graced the entire front. Was this some kind of macabre modern literature? One had to be pretty messed up to read such a book for personal enjoyment.

He looked away when Dazai uncrossed his legs and folded his hands to prop his head up on them, mustering Chuuya from underneath his lashes.

“You can take the seat; nobody else will be joining us.”

Chuuya only hesitated a second before he pulled the chair from under the table and sat down. He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable to have so many people in his back as he would have preferred to face them. Instead, he had a clear view on the street and the high-rise buildings across the street; however, he didn’t want to cause any inconveniences, so he accepted it silently.

At the expectant look Dazai gave him, Chuuya understood he wouldn’t say anything else until he did.

“Sorry for being late.”
“No big deal. You didn’t have to run. I would have waited ten minutes longer. I have plenty of time,” Dazai retorted, obviously amused.

Great, the guy saw him sprinting here. What a great first impression he had made – unorganized and taciturn if he continued the silence. He rarely stumbled over words, but Dazai’s entire demeanor came unexpected and had admittedly thrown him off. Although Chuuya had no idea what exactly he had expected, it certainly hadn’t been this.

His train of thoughts got interrupted as Dazai continued, eyeing him questioningly, “So you called me yesterday?”

“Yes, I’m Chuuya Nakahara, I got your number from Kunikida, the police commissioner.”

Raising his eyebrow and squinting at him while leaning forward, Dazai occupied Chuuya’s personal space who instinctively leaned further back into the seat. He came close enough for Chuuya to be well aware of the smell of his overly vigorous cologne. What was up with that guy?

“You are Chuuya? The pickpocket and nag of the police Atsushi told me about? I didn’t imagine you being so tiny!” Genuine surprise and fascination filled his voice.

For a brief moment, Chuuya was caught by surprise but then gritted his teeth. He had to put up with such comments more often than he would like to and refused to get used to them. As if his size was all that made him special.

“Say that again and I’ll show you what a tiny fist can do to your face.”

Although Dazai backed up, Chuuya failed to intimidate him as intended or else the corners of Dazai’s lips wouldn’t have pulled into an amused grin at that.

“Feisty. But message understood. Osamu Dazai.”

Chuuya took a deep breath. The guy managed to get on his nerves already and they had just gotten to know each other. He regretted this idea. Never could he work with somebody as obnoxious as Dazai but he had yet to find out what job he was offering, so he decided to sit through it.

He took a few seconds to take a closer look at the other’s appearance. Over all he was dressed decently, though a dress shirt and jeans were not extravagant by any means. A coat had been draped on the backrest of the chair, which he had probably worn upon his arrival.

What caught his attention were bright white bandages that peeked from under his sleeves and collar that he noticed only now, even though Dazai didn’t behave as if he hurt in any way. He didn’t pay particular caution to any body parts, moved freely and while he acted a little strangely, Chuuya’s judgment told him he wasn’t clouded by painkillers. If they weren’t for covering any injuries they were an odd choice of styling, he concluded.

He focused on Dazai’s face again as soon as Dazai addressed him.

“You are here for the work position I am offering, correct?”

Chuuya nodded. “What have you got for me?”

A stern expression had replaced Dazai’s amusement as he finally got to the part that interested Chuuya. “I am searching for a partner, who helps me with my cases. I require that person to have my back when needed and from time to time I have to rely on their social skills. Do you think you can do that?”
Dazai’s head tilted to the side. Chuuya considered the offer for a moment. That didn’t sound too bad.

“Possibly,” he answered, “I know how to defend myself, defending anybody else shouldn’t be a problem. Don’t know about the social skills though. What do you expect from me?”

“Great! Of course I would compensate you appropriately. The wage depends on the money a case brings in.”

He ignored Chuuya’s indirect question smoothly. Chuuya’s shoulders slumped. He had been naïve enough to believe Dazai had to offer something of interest to him but he guy couldn’t even straight out tell him what he did as an occupation and refused to enlighten him.

What a waste of time.

He didn’t listen anymore as Dazai continued to blabber about unusual working times that came with the job. Chuuya’s interest had faded. He would let him finish talking and then apologize himself and come up with an excuse why he was unsuitable.

Instead, he took the time to observe his surroundings.

He watched as masses of people passed by behind Dazai, most of them probably on their way to lunch. On the street, cars honked as the traffic jammed in front of the red light.

His eyes skimmed over the tower blocks, in whose windows the sun reflected and his gaze had already wandered over to the next building, when his eyes shot back to the one just across him.

On top of the building, on the edge of the roof, he made out a figure that paced up and down the length of the rooftop and wore a white coat.

On top of the building was a person.

Unable to avert his gaze, he followed their every movement. From left to right, right to left. The man remained on the roof top, dangerously close to the edge in an unsettling height. What was he doing there? In an effort to collect more information about him, Chuuya squinted. He didn’t seem to have a phone in his hands, he wasn’t talking either and nobody else kept him company as far as he could see.

Chuuya didn’t notice how he skidded closer to the edge of his seat or how his fingers curled around the arm rests too firmly, his focus solely on the lunatic. Hopefully he didn’t slip and fall from the building. It would be his death sentence.

By now, Dazai had stopped his monologue and he mustered Chuuya with a pout on his lips.

“Chuuya, are you even listening?”

But Chuuya didn’t hear him.

“Chuuya!”

Flinching at the exclamation, Chuuya uttered an acknowledging hum, without letting his focus falter.

“Yes?” he replied, not looking at Dazai.

“Is everything alright? You seem a little distracted.”
The man in the white coat had stopped in his tracks to stand right at the edge of the roof, few inches away from the precipice and stared far into the distance. Chuuya was more than worried. Nails dug into the wooden chair.

“There is someone on –“

Right as he was speaking the man turned his face and Chuuya could have sworn that he locked his gaze with his own, giving him a cracked smile before he made a final step forward, dropping from the building.

“Holy shit!” Chuuya shot to his feet in a split second, while he was still watching the man falling to the ground. The picture of his motionless body and the white coat waving in the wind burned itself into his mind for forever.

Several guests of the garden turned around to catch what was happening but Chuuya paid them no attention. Without thinking twice he ran and jumped over the fence in a smooth motion, heading straight for the building off which the coat-man had jumped. From behind he heard Dazai calling his name, but he didn’t care. He pushed past the people on the street and ignored their indignant shouts. Somebody screamed at him and a hand reached for his jacket as he sprinted over the crosswalk at a red light. A car honked, tires screeched and he leaped over the bonnet of a braking car.

In the back of his mind he registered that he put himself in danger, but his vision tunneled, only the place where the man should have hit the ground in sight.

Mere seconds ago he witnessed somebody committing suicide. A person died in front of his eyes. Could he have stopped him? Maybe he would have survived if Chuuya had done something. Or was he still alive?

Just in front of the building he turned his head from side to side in search for the man frantically. If the unlikely case occurred that he was alive, Chuuya would do his best to save him. Working his way through a mass of people, of which some cast him an irritated look, he scanned the ground for him, but there was no body.

No white coat, no person - as if the fall hadn’t happened at all.

He looked around once more, fearing to have overlooked him, but his sight didn’t betray him. Nobody had died.

“What? How?” Chuuya muttered to himself. He just couldn’t wrap his head around it. Had the man gotten up somehow? Was his mind playing tricks on him? Had he only imagined it all? He stopped the pacing, took a deep breath and bit his lower lip to steady himself. There had to be a rational explanation.

“Chuuya? What happened? You were talking and suddenly you rushed away. Did something happen to you?”

A sudden voice startled him and Chuuya flipped around to stare directly at Dazai. Concern was written all over the man’s face and Chuuya didn’t miss his panting. He must have hurried after him.

Too dazed to give off a snarky remark, he pushed his hands deep into his jacket’s pockets and pulled it tighter around his body before answering.

“I saw somebody jumping off that building,” he gestured a hand vaguely in the direction of the
scene, “But there’s nobody.” His voice was just above a whisper and it trembled ever so slightly, just as his knees did. Was he going insane?

Instead of declaring him for mad as Chuuya expected, Dazai came a step closer and placed a hand softly on his shoulder. Even though he despised being touched by strangers, he welcomed the action in this case; it helped him to remain on his feet.

“What exactly did you see?” Dazai asked him seriously, searching for his gaze.

“A man, wearing a white coat,” Chuuya said quietly, voice still shaking. “He stood at the edge of the roof, and then he just … fell.”

Chuuya reckoned on everything; that Dazai would shrug him off, that he would say he had imagined it, that he would try to distract him or that he would actually leave.

What he had not expected was a wide grin to spread on his face as his eyes lit up with joy, the other hand punching the air in victory.

“Finally!” he beamed, “Finally I have found somebody!”

What? Seconds ago Chuuya had told him a person had thrown themselves into their death and he celebrated it? Something was seriously wrong with that guy.

He shoved the hand off his shoulder and took two steps back to put some distance between them. Dazai’s reaction scared him, although he would never admit to it.

“Are you insane?” Chuuya yelled, not caring that they were in public. “Somebody might have died and you’re happy about that? What kind of Psych are you?”

As if he had been slapped across the face, Dazai’s happy expression vanished and got replaced by confusion. “Haven’t you figured it out by now?”

“Figured out what?” Chuuya snapped and watched intently as Dazai observed the people surrounding them. Nobody seemed to have noticed what had happened and they continued their day undisturbed. His mind tried so hard to comprehend the entire situation but nothing added up. The suicide didn’t and Dazai’s odd behavior did even less.

And when Chuuya thought it couldn’t get any more bizarre, Dazai proved him wrong.

As soon as he had found whatever he was looking for, he waved enthusiastically at someone Chuuya could not see, his sight blocked by people taller than him. Then, Dazai grabbed Chuuya’s hand, whom escaped a high pitched yelp, and dragged him with him, making Chuuya stumble over his own feet.

“Let go of me!” Chuuya made an attempt to free his hand, but he had underestimated Dazai’s strength. He might not look like it, but the man appeared to be fairly strong.

They reached their destination, apparently the wall of a building at the next crossroad, and Dazai released him immediately only to place both hands on Chuuya’s shoulders and push him around like a marionette. Everything in him was repelled by the treatment he received and he wanted nothing more than to leave this place at once, which turned out to be impossible. The grip Dazai had on him was too firm to wriggle out of and forced him to turn his attention to the street ahead of him.

Chuuya’s blood ran cold.
Walking up the street, a man approached them with confided strides and an even more self-assured grin. But what stuck out most was a familiar white coat.

It couldn’t be. That man should be dead.

And yet he stood in front of them, safe and sound. There was no scratch on his pale skin. No tear ruined his clothing.

Chuuya resisted the urge to scream in horror.

A shiver ran down his spine, making him shudder and the step back he made happened intuitively. He wanted to get as far away from the walking body as fast as possible. He hadn’t figured on Dazai standing so closely behind him though. Chuuya’s back met Dazai’s chest, whose grip around him tightened, as if he feared he would run off any second. Chuuya considered to do exactly that for a moment, but Dazai’s next words made him stay.

“I would like to introduce you to Kajii Motojirou, a friend of mine. Kajii, this is Chuuya.”

“Nice to meet you, Chuuya.” Even though Kajii flashed a grin at him and extended a hand properly, Chuuya was unable to do anything but stare at the figure. Expectant eyes gauged him, waiting for a response Chuuya couldn’t deliver. Only after a few seconds of silence he managed to put his thoughts into breathed words.

“How is this possible? You shouldn’t be alive.”

Yet again, they denied him an answer. Instead, Kajii snorted and turned to Dazai with a bemused expression.

Chuuya didn’t see how Dazai reacted, but he felt the pressure on his shoulders increasing again, before an unexpected shove forced him to spin around and face Dazai who looked at him with genuine surprise.

“You really have no idea, don’t you?”

“Idea about what?” Chuuya snapped. He had enough of unanswered question. He was tired of the game these two were obviously playing with him. With a jerk he broke free of Dazai’s grip. As the initial shock wore off, anger replaced it. Whoever had decided he would become a pawn in their chess game, he refused to play by their rules. He wanted answers. “I put my own life on brink for that idiot for nothing! I deserve to know what’s going on!”

A finger pointed right at Kajii, but his eyes remained on Dazai, whose expression gave away nothing. Chuuya’s face heated up in anger. His mind already prepared every single insult known to mankind to spit them all at Dazai, when the man seemed to think of it better, sighed, and finally opened his mouth.

“I apologize for putting you in danger. If I had known you were so clueless I would have chosen another approach. It’s just… usually a sighted person knows how to tell a human apart from a ghost.”

The color drained from Chuuya’s face.

“Ghost?”

“Have you really been living all these years unknowing that you had a special gift? What a pity.”
This had to be some kind of stupid joke. Ghosts weren’t real, they were part of stories parents told their children to scare them and only existed in horror movies.

“I don’t believe you. Tell me the truth.”

Dazai let his hands slip into the pockets of his coat and turned away from Chuuya to Kajii, who had watched the scene with amusement.

“I just told you. Kajii? If you would.”

Now Kajii broke out in full laughter but seemingly understood what Dazai wanted from him, which left Chuuya to watch how he made a step into the crowd, right in front of a passing by woman.

The lady didn’t pause a split second as she walked right through Kajii.

Chuuya’s face went pale. He didn’t know what to think anymore. Angry? Afraid? Confused? Betrayed?

All he felt was the upcoming desire to vomit. Hitting the ground hard he dropped to his knees as his legs gave way at last. This was all too much and he shut his eyes. The thoughts in his mind were spinning, trying to put it all together but nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Why hadn’t anyone told him? What else did he not know? What was real? Were his friends even real?

“Chuuya, do you hear me?”

A sound next to his ear made him wince. Slowly the sounds of the busy street reached him again and the first thing he saw were black shoes - Dazai’s shoes. He was crouching next to Chuuya, mustering him worriedly.

“Take a deep breath,” he instructed and Chuuya did.

“Good. Now take my hand, I’ll help you up.”

Chuuya took another breath before he reached for Dazai’s hand and let himself be pulled up to his feet again. Multiple people around them had stopped to observe what had happened, but how could they understand if most of them weren’t able to see the cause of Chuuya’s misery?

He avoided their stares and focused solely on Dazai.

“Let’s go for a walk. I believe you have a lot of questions and I want to answer them.” The way Dazai talked made it sound more like a command than a suggestion, although no force behind the words.

No other option left, Chuuya followed Dazai who went ahead. Of course he could have left, pretend that today had never happened and go on with his life as he used to - he still hoped this was some kind of sick joke. However, he doubted he would be able to do that after what he had just found out. The quickest and easiest way to receive the answers he needed was to go with Dazai - the only source he could rely on so far.

For some time they walked in silence, taking some quiet and remote alleys where less people than on the main road were present. It gave Chuuya an opportunity to sort out his thoughts to some extend and the needed time to regain some composure as well as it got his circulation going.

As soon as he had collected himself as best as possible, Chuuya asked ahead.
“Where did Kajii go?” He had wondered since they set off, because when he had gotten up back at the crossroad he hadn’t caught sight of him anymore.

“I thanked him, apologized for the circumstances and he went his way. He had done enough and I didn’t want to risk upsetting you even more. Also, I have asked him several times to do that, he deserves a break.” Dazai said as if it was the most normal thing ever and continued the even pace he had picked up while he answered.

“Several times?”

“Well, I have asked somebody else before him but he wasn’t so eager to repeat due to some problems we subsequently had. But Kajii is a maniac. He did it with pleasure until I found somebody who would see him.”

“And I was the first one?”

“Yep.”

Silence settled again, uncomfortable and awkward and Dazai made no attempt to break it while Chuuya considered his next question carefully. Although there obviously was no reason to, as he had already been told that his questions would be answered. There were just so many, he didn’t know where to start.

“Why do people turn into ghosts and does everyone?”

“Have you ever seen a ghost movie? It works almost the same in reality. Usually people vanish after they die, going to god knows where but probably a peaceful place and they are never seen again. Some, however, cannot do that. They still have something to achieve on earth, an unfulfilled wish in most cases. Only when they achieve their goal they can go to peace. Are you still following me?”

“Yes, I got it. Then Kajii has a wish that hasn’t been fulfilled yet too?”

“Exactly. But he will probably remain here on earth for a while, unless you know anybody who would be willing to blow up a building with lemon shaped bombs.”

A snort escaped Chuuya. By now he had calmed down enough to listen to Dazai with interest, eager to understand what he had just learned, and the reveal about Kajii amused him more than it should, probably due to its weirdness.

“It’s probably a good thing that the guy died. Who knows what he would have wreaked.”

“Oh, I can see Chuuya’s better now, he’s making jokes!” Chuuya could hear the grin in his voice. Meanwhile, they had entered an open area, seemingly some kind of dog-park, as several of those romped around freely. The gravel scrunched under his shoes, the sounds of the inner city had faded into the background while children’s laughter became louder.

“You’ve still scared the hell out of me, asshole. How could you think a fake suicide would solve your problems?” Chuuya bit, tone low.

“I would have jumped myself, however I am not a fan of pain and would it would have missed the point. Also, I already said that most sighted can recognize a ghost. You are the first one I’ve met who can’t.” Dazai sounded intrigued and Chuuya’s own curiosity grew.
“Then tell me, what’s the difference?”

Stopping in his tracks out of a sudden, Chuuya walked a few steps ahead of Dazai before he noticed and returned to him.

“There, do you see the couple on the bench there?” Dazai asked.

Chuuya affirmed.

“Now look closely. Concentrate. There should be a faint blue glow around them. That’s typical for ghosts. The color varies, but the glow is always the same.”

Blinking several times, Chuuya stared at the elderly couple as he tried to make out what Dazai had described and it took some seconds, but at some point it worked. A blue light appeared around them, subtle, but nevertheless there. He recognized it. He had seen it before, especially when he had been younger, but he had always thought he had been hallucinating.

“Wow, that’s –“

Dazai cut off his sentence, “Beautiful, I know.”

“I was going to say ‘actually a thing’, but you’re right too.”

Chuuya still watched the two of them as they sat in silence in the park, not paying attention to anyone around them, focused on each other. Even in death their love couldn’t be broken, how romantic.

“You might need some practice in recognizing it, but I am sure you will get it in no time. Any more questions?” Dazai asked.

Of course he had. Who wouldn’t? Facing Dazai again he intended to continue by asking if there were any dangers associated with ghosts when another question popped to his mind, which he had intended to ask the entire day.

“What exactly is your job?”

“I’m a ghost-hunter so to speak, and I deprive ghosts of their extra-mundane energy.” Dazai said it with such a straight face; if Chuuya hadn’t had the weirdest day in his life today he wouldn’t have believed him. But today nothing could surprise him anymore. That didn’t mean that he knew what Dazai was talking about.

“Before you can ask what exactly that is, I would rather show you. Get home, get some rest, and tonight, come with me to my next job, if you want to.”

The answer wasn’t in question. If he wanted to find out more about the world he had just gotten to know, which he did, then he had to get invested in it and what better opportunity could there be than this one? This wasn’t about the job anymore. This was about his own life.

“I’ll be there”, Chuuya said firmly.

“I’ll text you the address in early evening. You really should get some rest. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Very funny, keep your-,” but Dazai had already gone his way, and Chuuya watched him disappear. What an eccentric guy.
The tiredness that struck him came suddenly and the need to sleep even outweighed the excitement for tonight that rushed through Chuuya’s veins. More than ready to find out more about the entire ghost thing, he made his way home, albeit accepting a new reality would take more than some answered question. Hopefully, the job Dazai talked about would give him more insight.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading.
If you have any questions, feel free to ask!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

It's time to get to know the world they live in a little bit better.

TW: implications of self-harm, cuts & razor blades

This time, Chuuya managed to be on time. As the address Dazai had texted turned out to be close to the stopping place, it didn’t take long to get there. However, Dazai took his time showing up and the longer Chuuya waited the more impatient he got.

The sun had long set, night had fallen and stars shone brightly in the dark sky, the only light source the few streets lights along the street and meanwhile, the air was slowly turning colder with passing time. If Chuuya had known about Dazai’s belatedness he would have chosen to wear a warm hoodie instead of his usual leather jacket which failed to keep him warm and now he had to freeze.

From somewhere further away the sound of wind chimes reached him and in regular intervals he heard roller blinds shutting. The neighborhood appeared to be a quiet one where one single-family-home stood next to the other, each one with a trimmed front-yard and colorful flowers on the doorstep. The one Chuuya stood in front of even had a swing and a climbing frame in its garden, indicating the presence of children. Hopefully they were asleep by now and wouldn’t bother him.

Overall it was a nice area, yet Chuuya would never chose to live there, the silence and tranquility making him go insane alone at the thought of such a possibility. He needed the hectic rush, the noise and the flashy lights of a city to fall asleep in peace at night - or in the afternoon, like today.

As soon as he had come home he had flopped into his bed and had fallen asleep without a second thought. His body had ached for rest until he got disturbed by an incoming text message from Dazai, telling him time and place.

Now he felt significantly better - at least physically. Many questions continued going round in his head, taking him almost far enough to consult the internet for information before deciding that Dazai would be a much more reliable source.

Well, that, if he ever decided to show up.

As on call, Chuuya heard footsteps approaching from behind and when he turned around, he recognized Dazai, wearing the same clothes as he had in the morning, head held up high and hands hid in the coat-pockets. Chuuya could already tell he did that a lot.

Chuuya didn’t hide his disapproval of Dazai showing up too late as he grumbled, “You kept me waiting.”

“So did you this morning. I think we are even,” Dazai said as if it was self-explanatory.

His eyes scanned Chuuya from head to toe, taking in his appearance. Chuuya didn’t as much as shift under his gaze. How could anybody so confident in oneself? A little modesty would have
been justified, but of course Dazai didn’t show any when he spoke up.

“You look better too! Not as worn out as before. Although your clothes still do. Do you only have wear like this in your closet?”

Dazai’s head tilted ever so slightly in question and Chuuya balled his fists. Stay calm. He really didn’t want to lash out on Dazai now; knowing the guy was only teasing him for the ripped jeans but it nurtured his irritation nonetheless.

“Are they inappropriate for the job?” Chuuya asked instead.

“No, but-“

“Then I’m going to wear them.” If he hadn’t been watching him closely, Chuuya wouldn’t have noticed how Dazai’s nose scrunched up in disapproval, though he let the topic slip.

Dazai sighed. “Are you ready to go in?”

“If I wasn’t I wouldn’t be here. What exactly are we doing?”

When he had arrived, he had immediately wondered what could make a family desperate enough to call a ghost hunter. The street could have been out of a picture book, nothing amiss. The house had been quiet as well - no screams, no loud noise, no movement behind the curtains, nobody rushing through the front door in fear. But who would know better than he did: Things were not always as they seemed.

“I was told they had a problem with a ghost. The woman who called me sounded petrified, practically begging me to help them. She hasn’t given me more information.”

“That’s all you know?” Chuuya’s lips pulled up in a discontent snarl.

“Well, I bet she will tell us more as soon as we are inside. Are you coming?”

Dazai was already walking up the porch, cheerful as ever as he talked and Chuuya quickly hurried after him. If he was honest, that sounded quite boring. It would be a miracle if Dazai actually needed him, but he was ready for everything that came next.

The doorbell - a friendly, almost playful melody - sounded from inside the house and almost immediately after Dazai had pushed the button, someone hurried to the door. Opening it hesitantly, a woman, younger than Chuuya had expected, peeked through the crack.

“Are you Dazai?”

“Yes, and this is my assistant, Chuuya. You must be Mrs. Kikaro. We are here at your call.” Dazai had put on a smile that could have wrapped everyone around a finger. The sight drew a scoff from Chuuya. So that was his tactic.

Enough an answer to put her at ease, she opened the door fully and motioned them to come in.

A wave of warmth hit Chuuya and a sweet smell made his mouth water. He would give anything for a piece of cake. The thought was pushed aside at once when the lady told them to follow her into the living room.

Looking out for anything unusual, Chuuya observed the room, but everything seemed perfectly fine. One photograph next to the other hung on the walls, showing a small but happy family with a
little boy that grew elder with every picture but on none he could have been older than six. So that must be his current age.

A gray haired man was sitting on the edge of a leather sofa in the living room, a foot rocking up and down nervously; an annoying habit in Chuuya’s eyes. As soon as he noticed them entering, he stood up and extended a hand to each of them, which they politely shook.

“I’m Yukichi Fukuzawa, Haruno’s husband. Thank you for coming on short notice.”

Getting comfortable without an invitation, Dazai seated himself in one of the armchairs across the sofa and Chuuya followed his lead. He sat down next to him, sinking deeply into the soft cushions. The leather jacket got discharged; he hated sweating.

“I had an empty spot tonight, so it’s no problem. Please, tell me about the ghost that has been troubling you” Dazai said, calm as ever.

Mrs. Kikaro clutched her husband’s hand tightly and interweaved their fingers. Her gaze flicked around nervously, almost as if she was making sure nobody else was listening. Chuuya quickly scanned the room but couldn’t see anybody, neither human nor ghost.

When she had made sure for herself, she began telling the story.

“You must know, we have only recently moved here. It must have been four months ago. At first everything seemed fine, it was perfect. We have a son, Kenji, he’s six now. He was the first one to notice strange incidents. It all began when I noticed his books were arranged differently. I asked him why he did that, but he said ‘That wasn’t me, the boy did it’. We thought he had made up an imaginary friend, you know, just like children do sometimes.”

A sudden sob interrupted her speech, tears flowed, making her cover her face with her hands. To calm her down, her husband began stroking her back in soothing motions.

“It’s alright, they will fix this, then you won’t have to worry anymore.”

She nodded slightly, sniffing quietly before getting back to explaining with a tremor in her voice.

“I’m sorry. Well, in the following days some of his toys were rearranged, a picture had been painted on his wall with crayons and at some point, even a shelf broke down. Each time we asked why he did that, he would blame it on the boy. Then, he gave us a drawing of what he saw, saying that if we couldn’t see him, he would show him to us.” Her voice broke. “I can’t do this, Yukichi.”

She broke down in heavy sobs again and as he tried to calm her down he handed them a sheet of paper. Dazai took it and Chuuya had to lean over the armrest to have a look at it. It had been made by the hand of a child who had tried their best but couldn’t do any better.

Chuuya identified the person on paper as a little boy, probably due to the mentioning before, in a dark blue coat and matching hat and a doll held in the figures hands. Looking closer he also noticed the bicolored hair, blond and black. Well, at least the ghost would be easy to recognize.

The husband took over.

“At that time, we still believed he was speaking about an imaginary friend. We both didn’t believe in ghosts, so we had no reason to change our minds. Until one day, when I passed Kenji’s room and heard some strange noises. Kenji was at a friend’s place, it was impossible that he was making them. So I opened the door to see two of his plushies floating in the air. I stepped in and they instantly dropped to the floor. On the bed, a ditch in the blanked appeared. As if somebody had sat
down. I shut the door. I know now that Kenji is not fantasizing.”

Mr. Fukuzawa let out a shaking breath, exhausted from telling what had been going on in their household. Meanwhile, his wife had calmed down a little, but her face was still swollen and puffy.

Chuuya cast a quick glance at Dazai to see what he thought about the situation. While the story may seem scary – or ridiculous – to people who had no idea about ghosts, nothing about it seemed even roughly threatening.

If their son was sighted, wouldn’t it be good for him to have contact with ghosts from an early age, so he learned everything he needed to know? Wanting to ask Dazai, he refrained from doing so, because Dazai paid him no attention but watched the couple intently with a blank expression. He had listened to them in silence and nothing gave away his thoughts. The questions he asked next surprised Chuuya.

“When did the boy hurt your son for the first time?”

Hurt? They never mentioned any injuries, why did he assume the son got hurt?

Seeing the shocked expressions of the couple, Dazai had to be correct all along. How did he know?

“A week ago. How do you know?” Mrs. Kikaro voiced Chuuya’s confusion.

Dazai leaned forward to prop up his elbows on his thighs, hands folded.

“Although every parent worries for her children, it is unusual for them to be so concerned just because their son has an extraordinary friend. And you asked me to get rid of the ghost urgently. There’s also a med-kit on the drawer back there.”

Now that Dazai mentioned, Chuuya noticed the med-kit as well. Placed directly in his field of view, bright red, he wondered how he hadn’t seen it sooner.

“Please tell me, what happened.” Dazai prodded further.

“Last week it were only minor scratches on his arms and legs. Children fall, nothing out of the ordinary. But yesterday, he rushed down the stairs, bawling, with his arms covered in blood. The cuts were sharp, as if made with a razor blade. I treated the cuts and he kept crying and asking why he had done it. I am afraid of what else the ghost could do to my boy. Please, make him disappear. I beg you.”

Unable to hold back the tears, Kikaro sobbed again. Chuuya felt pity for her. Although he really had no sentiment for children, he related to the feeling of seeing a beloved one hurt, especially when they were defenseless.

Dazai hummed in affirmation, absentmindedly tapping a finger on his jaw in a steady rhythm, obviously brooding over something.

“As much as I wish to pursue your wish, I can only promise you that your son won’t be physically harmed by the ghost any longer after I have finished my job. However, I cannot promise you he will leave, as this depends on several factors. We will do our best to put him to peace, but I can’t make a pledge.”

Picking up the word “we” instantly, Chuuya listened up, a little excited to know if he would really be able to help.
“That alone would help us a lot. We just want to keep Kenji save,” Kikaro pleaded.

It was then that something crossed Chuuya’s mind. They had been talking about their son so much; he being to one affected by the ghost the most. Yet he hadn’t been around and Chuuya would have surely noticed if he had been lurking behind the doors. Children weren’t sneaky enough to eavesdrop longer conversations without being spotted. He hadn’t been as a child at least. For the first time since entering, he spoke up.

“Mrs. Kikaro, where is your son right now?”

Blinking as if she hadn’t actually believed he could speak, she hesitantly answered.

“He’s in his room upstairs. I wanted him out of house today but when I told him that the ghost had to leave today, he got pretty upset and insisted on properly saying good-bye.”

“Oh no, this is bad.”

Dazai got on his feet abruptly, giving nobody a chance to find out what was wrong as he was out of the room at once, rushing up the stairs, the quick steps making them creak.

A glance into the parent’s direction revealed their shocked expressions, but Chuuya had no intention of calming them down since he had no idea what was going on. He promptly went after Dazai. Setting foot on the first step he already heard a child crying, whimpering intelligible words of despair and fear that grew louder the higher up the stairs he hasted. The whining got interrupted by a second voice, shrill and clearly agitated.

It didn’t need much thinking to find out where the noise originated, because Dazai stood in front of a door with a colorful nameplate attached to it that said “Kenji”, leaning forward with caution to catch a glimpse of the happenings inside. Dying to find out as well, Chuuya pushed Dazai aside at his hip and duck to silently position himself under Dazai’s supporting arm in order to get a better view, as Dazai was too tall for him to look over his shoulder. Dazai let out a suppressed snort but said nothing.

On the bed sat a little boy with blond hair which Chuuya recognized from the family pictures, tears covering his cheeks. He was cornered by another boy sitting across him. In his hands, a razor blade reflected the light of the room, held close to Kenji’s already bleeding arms. This had to be the ghost. After a second of concentration Chuuya made out a faint magenta glow surrounding him. Kenji had really captured the boy’s appearance well, every detail of his clothing reflected in his drawing, except for a yellow scarf that was wrapped around the boy’s neck.

“You send me away, if you do, I’ll have to hurt you!” The ghost yelled.

Kenji hid his face in the crook of his elbow and Chuuya saw him trembling even from distance. His heart rate picked up in worry when the blade ghosted over Kenji’s arms again.

“Dazai, do something!” Although just above a whisper, the urgency was unmistakable in Chuuya’s voice.

Dazai flinched but immediately got into action, opening the door. Chuuya barely managed to get away from under his arm.

As he stepped into the room, Chuuya took his place at the doorframe, deciding to watch him work from a safe distance - just in case, to avoid interfering.

“Hey, what are you two doing here? This looks a little dangerous to me, don’t you think?” The
tone in which Dazai spoke carried a softness Chuuya would have never ascribed to him. Seemingly he knew how to act other than annoying or serious.

Two heads turned at the unexpected visitor and the ghost hastily recoiled from his threatening position, the blade swiftly disappearing behind his back. A wide grin stretched from one ear to another, eyes narrowing in joy.

“Everything fine, we were just playing.” Even if Chuuya hadn’t witnessed him threatening Kenji moments ago he wouldn’t have believed the act of innocence. It was too artificial to be honest.

Dazai played along.

“That’s great!” He paused and threw an obvious gaze at Kenji’s arms, an expression of concern appearing on his features. In another life he must have been an actor.

“Oh, Kenji, have you hurt yourself? How clumsy you are. Come here, we will treat it right away.”

Right in the middle of the room he got down into a crouch and reached out for the boy who must have understood what was going on, despite his young age. He scrambled off the bed and threw himself into Dazai’s arms. They wrapped around him briefly as Dazai whispered words Chuuya didn’t hear into Kenji’s ear and when he let go of him, the boy rushed out of the room.

Guessing it would be beneficial to stay undetected for now, Chuuya stepped back, hiding behind the wall, just to pull Kenji to the side as he burst round the corner. He was still crying in fear, not caring whose arms enclosed him, only yearning for the feeling of safety and suddenly, Chuuya found himself cradling the kid in his arms.

Shit.

What was he supposed to do? Comfort him? How in the world did you comfort kids?

Tears soaked his shirt on the shoulder; he felt the dampness on his bare skin. The back must have gotten covered in bloody smears from the boy’s arms, some patches equally wet like from the tears, but Chuuya had other things to worry about.

Placing a tentative hand on the boy’s shoulder blades he gently stroked up and down his back. With his thumb he drew little swirls in hope of them soothing Kenji and alternated them with mellow pats.

He knew the parents were just at the end of the hallway, watching him and probably judging him.

Gosh, hopefully he was doing this right.

“Shhh, you are safe now. Look, there are you parents, they will help you,” Chuuya reassured.

As gentle as he could he pushed Kenji away to point a finger at the parents. His swollen eyes lit up with relief and off he rushed to them. He was swept into loving arms and rushed downstairs, most likely to treat his injuries.

Thank god, that went smoothly.

Chuuya now picked up pieces of the conversation inside the room.

“It’s not nice to interrupt our play.” Displeasure was evident in the young voice.

“I know and I am sorry, but injuries must be treated.”
“They could have been later,” the ghost scoffed.

Dazai changed the subject. “Would you mind telling me your name?”

“Kyusaku. Everybody calls me Q.”

“Can I call you that too?”

When Chuuya peeked into the room, Q was sitting on the edge of the bed and nodded, hands folded in his lap, feet dangling in the air. Dazai kneeled in front of him, being almost at eye level that way.

“That’s a nice name. Have you lived here for a long time?” For some reason, Dazai knew exactly what to say to keep Q interested and simultaneously pry information out of him.

Being honest with himself, Chuuya envied him a little for that. Dealing with children had never been one of his strengths; he simply failed to understand them.

“I have always lived here. Mum and Dad went away but I stayed here. I like it here.” Q picked up a small doll that lay in a corner of the bed, plain fabric stitched together into a human like figure with huge black buttons as eyes. It was clad in clothes similar to Q’s own. Creepy.

In all this time, Dazai hadn’t moved an inch and kept distance to the kid. He didn’t try touching him. Could sighted people even touch ghosts? Stupid question, this boy very much could, even managed to hurt another child.

Slowly, Chuuya’s feet fell asleep and he shifted his weight to the other leg.

“I can understand, it’s a lovely house. I saw you had something in your hand before. What was it?” His gaze never wavered as he asked overly interested.

“Do you promise not to punish me?” Q backed up a little, distrusting eyes glaring at Dazai.

Dazai promised with a sincere smile and nod.

One of Q’s hands reached behind his back and grabbed an object from the blanket to present it Dazai proudly.

“Look! Isn’t it pretty? So shiny and sharp. Would you like to play with it too? Please, play with me!”

Chuuya doubted Q’s definition of playing coincided with his own but rather meant covering Dazai in cuts. This kid had a real mental issue. If he had still been alive Chuuya would have insisted on sending him to a mental health center. Now that wouldn’t be necessary anymore.

“Sure, show me. How do you play this game?”

Wait. The way he smiled at Q seemed to tell that he really wanted to go through with this. When he stretched out his open palm to him, Chuuya’s jaw dropped. He wouldn’t do that, would he?

Nervous anticipation spread in Chuuya, his body stiffened up at the spark in Q’s widened eyes. Scooting closer to the edge of the bed, Q greedily grabbed Dazai’s hand, placing the blade over Dazai’s significantly larger palm.

Chuuya fought all urges to not burst into the room and stop whatever this was by telling himself that Dazai was indeed an expert in what he did and surely had a greater plan in mind. At the same
time he found it hard to believe that while watching whatever this was.

The blade hovered just above the skin and right when it seemed as if the boy would break the tissue with a sinister grin on his lips, Dazai twisted his hand and grabbed Q’s wrist.

That moment, blue ribbons of light emerged from the touch so blinding, Chuuya covered most of his face with an arm but he was unable to avert his gaze fully. The ribbons danced around the two people, moving in circles and whirling around each other. Each corner of the room bathed in the intense glow.

Chuuya watched the light intensifying and the loops growing further apart - beautiful and yet so elusive - until out of a sudden, it all collapsed. As fast as the ribbons had emerged, as equally quickly they drew back into their source – Dazai’s palm.

What the hell had he just witnessed?

Dazai remained kneeling on the floor, calm and composed and as the last strays of blue vanished, Dazai opened his hand and let it slip off the boy’s arm. While Chuuya’s eye sight may not have been the best at times, he was convinced Q had obtained a form of sheerness which hadn’t been there previously. He blinked, just to make sure he hadn’t erred but it remained.

The atmosphere had shifted. He couldn’t tell why, he simply felt it.

Had he missed Dazai using any spells? Or did he carry any objects with him to carry out something like that?

To be fair, Chuuya had no idea how it worked. Dazai hadn’t explained a lot, only told him to watch, but the lack of knowledge began to strain his nerves. How was he supposed to help if he didn’t know how?

But most urgently, Chuuya wanted to know if he would be able to do something like this as well, as soon as he had found out the trick behind the magic.

Q blinked rapidly, rattled and confused and his eyes had not quite recovered from the blinding light when he frantically reached for Dazai’s hand again. In vain. His own hand slipped through Dazai’s as if he didn’t sit in front of him in flesh and blood.

Chuuya’s eyes widened.

The scream filled the entire room. “What have you done!”

“I took your extra-mundane energy. Now, you can’t hurt anybody else,” Dazai said, still talking with calmness and acting as nothing significant had happened.

Never before had Chuuya seen a child throwing a tantrum, but the boy surpassed all his expectations. At the first scream Chuuya jumped, his heart skipping a beat. Q yelled, cried, roared, spit words in Dazai’s direction a child his age shouldn’t know and tried to attack him over and over again. And Dazai? He didn’t move, staying at his spot with a ghost child all over and through him.

Closing his eyes, he sighed, audible to Chuuya several feet away whose fingers clawed the doorframe. Then Dazai made an attempt to calm Q down.

“Q, listen. This is no place for you. There must be –“

“No. No no no. NO! You all will regret this! GET OUT!” Q stormed, grabbed his ugly doll and
hurled it at Dazai with perfect aim.

It passed right through him without causing any harm. Nevertheless, Dazai got up to his feet and ignored the child as he went for the door.

Again, Chuuya hid behind the wall to remain unnoticed. Dazai closed the door behind him when exiting and leaned against the wall across from Chuuya, letting his head fall back in exhaustion.

“What an ill-bred child.”

That’s all he had to say? Not a word about what has taken place? He never would enlighten Chuuya on his own as it seemed, no matter regarding the topic.

Inside Kenji’s room, Q continued to fulminate, his screams and insults perfectly understandable outside the room. Chuuya ignored them in favor of getting answers.

“What was that?”

Tired, Dazai closed his eyes.

“I have a way of removing a ghost’s extra-mundane energy. It’s what allows them to interact with objects and humans directly. This boy’s was apparently very pronounced.”

Chuuya had no idea what he was talking about. “But you cannot make them leave?”

“Not with any power. Only by talking them through what’s bothering them.”

“Then why are you talking to me?” Chuuya squinted.

The parents asked him to make him disappear and he hadn’t even tried. He couldn’t possibly think it would be a good idea to leave it at that. In his rage, Q would surely mentally destroy Kenji. Was Dazai even thinking?

Dazai reopened his eyes and lowered his chin to meet Chuuya’s judging look. Humor glinted in his eyes.

“Do you really believe that brat will talk to me? Haven’t you heard him? He called me a ‘whoring bastard’. I wonder where he picked that one up…”

As much as Chuuya hated being in the wrong, Dazai might be right. Q didn’t appear to be ready to talk to Dazai anymore. Absorbed in thought Chuuya stared at the floor, contemplating if Dazai had any other option left to try. Going in would most likely be unwise, and Kenji was too young to do anything like that.

The snap of a finger brought him back.

“Oh Chuuyaaa, I know what to do!” Dazai singsonged.

“What?”

“You must go in. He doesn’t know you. Maybe he will talk to you,’ Dazai smiled widely, eyes sparkling with excitement.

Chuuya froze. His eyes widened for a split second only to narrow into thin slits.

“The hell I am going to. I don’t do well with children, they hate me!”
“Oh, come on! Kenji didn’t hate you.”

“No.” Chuuya refused.

“At least give it a try. Do it for the family. Just imagine Kenji having to spend the rest of his childhood with an angry ghost. Don’t you feel sorry for him?”

The image of Kenji, frightened and disturbed in a corner, popped into Chuuya’s mind and he damned himself for having such a soft heart. Of course he didn’t want that. Nobody should suffer in such a way. Damn it. Dazai knew exactly where to hit.

Chuuya’s shoulders slumped. “Fine.”

When he entered the room for the first time this night, he immediately had to dodge several flying blades, only then remembering they couldn’t hurt him if Q could touch them. But where did he even get those?

“GET OUT!”

Chuuya ignored the order and sat down in a chair. He considered his first words carefully, not eager on triggering the child into another tantrum.

“I am not here to hurt you.” He knew his voice lacked Dazai’s, although faked, sensitivity. He couldn’t do that when he didn’t even know what to say.

“The other said that too!”

Well done, Chuuya praised himself.

“I can’t do anything. I have no powers. I swear.” If he believed that, it would be a miracle, but Chuuya had nothing better to say. He needed to go with the truth.

“Show me. Touch me.”

Without thinking twice, Chuuya put his hand, covered with a black glove, into Q’s extended palm. Nothing happened.

As if a switch had been flipped, all fury left the ghost, only curiosity playing on his features. Intriguing, how quickly his mood changed.

“Who are you?”

Who was he? Well, a man who knew almost nothing about the things going on and struggled to put everything together. But that information wouldn’t help Q.

“I’m Chuuya. I have been told you are having a hard time. I’m here to listen.” Was he doing this right?

“Listen to what?” Chuuya’s skin itched under Q’s stare and he opened his mouth to answer before closing it again. Good question. Dazai told him he should talk him through whatever bothered him. But Q’s just a child. He wouldn’t know.

Unfulfilled wishes.

Dazai had mentioned them in the afternoon: every sojourning ghost had a desire they ache to have fulfilled. That was it.
He leaned forward, closer to Q. “I have a question for you. What is your biggest wish?” The kid seemed fairly interested in him, mirroring his movement. Q’s mind rattled, Chuuya almost heard it.

“I want to see your blood flow!”

That answer was unexpected and startled Chuuya. He had hoped for a different answer but he could play along. At Q’s enthusiastic grin, Chuuya’s lips curved into a catty smile. He wouldn’t be tricked by a child.

“This is no fun when you are lying. Tell me the truth, Kyusaku, that’s your name, right? What’s the one wish you want to have fulfilled the most?”

The ghost confused Chuuya; a child in every way, look- and behavior-wise, but he comprehended more than one would attribute him. His mind must have matured over time, if only a little. Maybe not treating him like a child would lead to the goal.

Q remained silent. Chuuya didn’t press. Instead he just waited.

Q’s gaze flicked to the door, then turned to Chuuya again.

“You can’t tell anybody.”

“I won’t.”

A pause.

“I want to be loved,” he whispered, “Nobody likes me. They promised to like me when I cut. They lied.” A sudden sadness flashed over Q’s face and he didn’t look at Chuuya anymore, missing how his brows furrowed in confusion.

Didn’t parents usually overflow with love for their children? Just because he didn’t relate to that, didn’t mean nobody else did. Then again, what kind of parents did the ghost have to talk him into believing that blood made people happy? What a mess.

But if that truly was Q’s biggest wish, it could be fulfilled, at least he could try. That wasn’t too far-fetched.

Taking pity in Q, the hardness Chuuya had put on gave way to something softer while he tried to come up with a strategy.

“Cuts don’t make people happy,” he began.

“They don’t?” Q didn’t seem to believe him.

“No, cuts make people sad.”

“Is this why they never loved me?”

“I don’t know. But there must have been somebody who loved you.”

Q shook his head, his locks bouncing and the black strands mixing with the white. “Mama and Papa didn’t.”

His chest tightened at the words. They made him think of his own parents. They had loved him with every piece of their hearts, giving away everything just to have him in a safe place. He never knew the sorrow of being castaway, his entire life he had been surrounded by people who
supported him.

But Q obviously had never experienced any security in his family, resulting in the development of a unique coping mechanism. Had he really been left alone his entire life and afterlife?

“But you did have friends; they must have liked spending time with you.”

The doll was hugged tighter as tears filled up Q’s eyes, a watery glint covering them. Chuuya had fucked up. He didn’t want to make him cry. Children did have friends, usually! He didn’t know.

At the first quiet sniffs, Chuuya started panicking. Not again a crying child. One had already been enough.

“Kenji likes playing with you!” He blurted out. He had no idea if that was true, but he couldn’t come up with anything better.

“Kenji is scared of me,” Q whimpered.

“Yes, but only because he is afraid of cuts! He really liked playing with you.” A shot into the dark and silent prayers were sent in hope of it being the truth.

“He did?”

Chuuya released a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“Yes, he told me! He had so much fun with you! Did you know that’s love too? Love is not always about parents. Friends can love you too. It’s just a different kind of love.” He tried to pat Q on the shoulder, only to be reminded of Q’s lack of extra-mundane energy.

“You think so?”

“I know. Love appears in different forms. And in a way, Kenji loves you.”

“So, I have been loved all the time?” He wiped the tears away with the back of his hand; a spark of hope flashed up, making Chuuya smile so softly, he was surprised by himself.

“Yes. Even if you don’t believe it, there will always be somebody who loves you. You just have to look for it in the right place.”

Q’s happy face melted Chuuya’s heart. In all his life time, he had never seen somebody beaming like the ghost did – and all because of Chuuya.

In the next moment, the ghost’s appearance changed. Though having been translucent before, Q now slowly faded away right in front of Chuuya’s eyes. The boy noticed as well.

“Chuuya, what’s happening?”

And for once, Chuuya new exactly what to say, even if he had to lie again.

“It’s time for you to go to where only love exists. Good Bye, and good luck.”

Chuuya already saw the wall behind through the boy, only a faint outline of the before so dimensional body visible.

“Thank you.” The gratitude almost broke Chuuya’s heart. He didn’t deserved it.
Then, Kyusaku was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the support this fic received so far!
I really didn't expect people to like it as much as they do.

So far, I have 13 of 16/17 chapters written, and I will be finished until it's time to post chapter 14. I can make the promise of not abandonning this fic, it will definitely be finished, so that's not something you must fear
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

So here we go again. This chapter includes the first PoV switch. Most chapters are written in Chuuya's PoV with some exceptions, like here.
No trigger warnings on this one

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya was sitting in a chair with his knees pulled up, staring at an empty spot in the middle of the room and Kyusaku was nowhere to be seen. Dazai pushed the door fully open, the quiet creaking drawing Chuuya’s attention. While Dazai hadn’t exactly expected him to be over the moon, the sad expression surprised him. Chuuya had just successfully sent a ghost to peace at the very first attempt; he was allowed to be proud of himself.

Instead, Chuuya sat there, slouched and thoughtful, fingers picking at the hem of those ridiculous leather gloves.

“Congratulations! You did it! You’ve send your first ghost to peace.” Dazai tried to cheer the redhead up. Chuuya had no reason to be miserable and although he rose to his feet, Chuuya didn’t appear to be gleeful at all. The sadness replaced by a forced emotionless expression, Chuuya got out of the room, not even glancing at Dazai as he pushed past him.

Dazai didn’t understand. The job went well, almost perfectly even. What could possibly bother him? He turned on his heels, watching as Chuuya waited for him in the doorframe.

“Shouldn’t we tell the parents that we did our job?” Chuuya asked, avoiding eye-contact at all cost.

A frown appeared on Dazai’s face when Chuuya walked away without him, heading downstairs. What’s wrong with the guy? If he tried to be subtle about whatever was crawling up his spine he was failing. He really had to learn how to cover his emotions better; he was an open book.

Before he could consider his action, Dazai headed after him. He reached him at the edge of the stairs and yanked him back by his shirt. If he wanted to sulk, fine. But Dazai would not let him face the family with a sour expression, even if it wasn’t meant to be such. The parents had a reason to be relieved, not to be scared because his assistant couldn’t keep his emotions together.

“It wouldn’t be wise to try keeping things from me. What happened in there?” Dazai said, voice so low it was almost a growl, clutching the shirt tightly and he only let go when Chuuya tried to wiggle out of his grip and a foot missed his kneecap only by a few inches.

“Don’t you dare grabbing me again, asshole! Keep your dirty fingers away from me!” Chuuya hissed.

Then, Dazai understood and let go. Beneath Chuuya’s rage, a glimpse of regret and doubt flared up and somehow it confused Dazai even more.

“What did you do? Whatever it is, I won’t judge you,” Dazai put effort into his words, not letting judgment cloud his words, just sheer interest, “After all, you reached tonight’s utter most goal.”
From outside Kenji’s room Dazai had only caught some fragments of the conversation, not nearly enough to put the pieces together; therefore, he had no idea what had been going on in there. He only knew that Chuuya had calmed the ghost down or he certainly would have heard screams.

Chuuya eyed him warily and his weight shifted onto one foot again, undoubtedly to be prepared for the next kick.

Dazai didn’t take offense in the distrust Chuuya had in him. After all they had met only this afternoon; the smartest thing to do was to distrust him. He wouldn’t trust Chuuya with his own life either. But if he wanted this partnership to work out, then he would have to confide in Dazai at least a little. Maybe not today but over time, under the condition that Chuuya would accept his job offer.

A step back gave Chuuya more space, and some tension disappeared from his shoulders.

“Does it matter how a ghost found its peace?” Chuuya asked, suddenly appearing smaller than he already was.

“Not as far as I know. Once they are gone, they cannot reappear.”

To be fair, Dazai could only talk from personal knowledge and experiences. But he found it hard to imagine that a ghost could come back from peace. Without reason to leave eternal rest, no ghost would come to this horrible place called earth again voluntarily.

“Good. Because I think I lied to him.”

Unable to hold back a chuckle, Dazai quickly covered his mouth with a hand to cover it, but of course Chuuya took notice, eyebrows furrowing in anger.

“What’s so funny?”

That’s what bothered Chuuya? He had yet so many things to learn if he wanted to make this.

“Do you really think every ghost that vanishes gets their wish complied? If that was the case, the world would have already burnt down to ashes.”

He had real struggles to stop laughing, as Chuuya’s eyes grew wide in disbelief. Someday he would tell Chuuya about the weirdest lies he had told up to now. Sure, lying wasn’t always easy, but you get used to it over time and sometimes it really served for the better. It could make or break a job.

As the laughter died down, Dazai’s eyes softened and a faint, encouraging smile played on his lips, “Don’t worry about it Chuuya, whatever you did, everybody can rest in peace now.”

A hint of relief washed over Chuuya’s face before it vanished and he gave Dazai an acknowledging nod before walking down the stairs.

Dazai trotted after him into the living room where the small family had gathered on the large sofa.

Bandages covered Kenji’s arms now, similar to his own with the difference that the boy’s showed traces of blood at some spots, while his were as clean as they had been when he had put them on.

He didn’t bother to take a seat but straightened his back, all the professional he was.

“The ghost is gone now. He won’t bother you again.”

“Thank god!” Mrs. Kikaro cried out. She pulled her son closer to him, burying her nose in his hair,
while he clung onto her as if his life depended on it.

“It’s over now, nothing will happen to you anymore,” she reassured Kenji, then turned to them, “Thank you, you two, from the bottom of my heart.”

“It’s our job.” Dazai waved her off.

After all, he had volunteered to take care of the problem; being his own boss meant that no obligations were pushed upon him. He could refuse a case whenever he liked but so far he had never done so. If people didn’t insist on it, he wouldn’t even take their money. This had never been about the money for him but about helping people who needed it. The cash happened to be a nice bonus.

Kenji shifted in his mother’s lap, turning to face Dazai and Chuuya, sad and worried.

“Is Q mad at me? I don’t want him to be mad.”

Dazai had already opened his mouth but Chuuya preempted him.

“Q has never been mad at you. He is very happy that you spent so much time with him.”

After being so uncomfortable about having lied to the ghost, Dazai doubted Chuuya lied again. It only fostered his curiosity about what had actually happened. The child averted without any reaction, maybe too tired and too young to fully comprehend the situation.

Nothing left to be said, the husband rose to his feet and showed them out. From the corner of the eye, Dazai saw Chuuya grabbing his hideous leather jacket before following them. As they reached the door, Fukuzawa told them to wait there and then he disappeared into another room, just to come back with a bundle of banknotes which he pressed into Dazai’s hands.

“I hope that’s enough to accommodate you. Thank you, you helped us a lot.”

Dazai quickly flipped through the banknotes, coming to the conclusion it had to be about three grand and pocketed them.

“That’s more than enough, we must thank you.”

They said their good-byes, ready to leave and already out the door, when Fukuzawa’s voice carried through the night.

“One last question. How did you know our son was in danger?”

Dazai stopped in his tracks and fought the urge to sigh, the answer too obvious to him.

“Simple, Mr. Fukuzawa. How would you react if you were told people were coming to kill you?”

He didn’t wait for a response.

A second pair of steps followed Dazai down the path to the street and walked along with him through the night in silence, neither of them knowing what to say.

Chuuya had done a great job tonight. Despite only finding out about his special gift today, he handled everything with an unexpected calmness and engaged with everything he could give. He might be a little short tempered, sure, but as long as he kept the anger away from the clients, Dazai could handle. Honestly, without him Dazai would have failed to send the ghost away. While easily sussed out, children could be so stubborn.
Unable to leave the question unanswered, curiosity irking him, he turned to look at Chuuya, “What have you told the ghost?”

“He wanted to be loved. So I told him Kenji loved him, just in a different way than parents did.” Chuuya continued walking, looking straight ahead.

Dazai’s head tilted in consideration. “That’s pretty smart.”

“But I don’t know if that’s true.” Dazai’s eyes narrowed, but Chuuya hid his emotions well behind an nearly unreadable mask for once.

“Kenji has obviously cared for the ghost. You were probably close to the truth.” The words were meant to be encouraging, but somehow they failed to reach Chuuya.

“How would you know?” Chuuya scoffed.

“I don’t. And you won’t either. Don’t let things affect you when they will never worry you again,” Dazai’s voice softened and he interpreted Chuuya’s lack of further response as acceptance.

Dazai decided to press more important matters. He had brought him with him tonight for a reason. He tried to suppress the nervousness that crept up as he uttered the most important question of the night. “What do you say? Will you work with me?”

“You make it sound like a marriage proposal,” Chuuya responded dryly, making Dazai snort out a laugh and shifting the mood into something more joyful.

“Would you agree if it was?” Dazai wiggled his eyebrows.

“Hell no!” The shocked expression alone was worth the joke, making Dazai laugh again, which served to irritate and annoy Chuuya. Making fun of Chuuya might become one of his new favorite hobbies. He liked how Chuuya’s cheeks flushed just too easily in anger.

“Then will you at least take job offer?” Dazai asked between giggles.

He really hoped he would agree. He had proven to be a valuable asset tonight, his mind sharp, able to pick up on details and although he denied it, he had a great deal of empathy, especially for children as it seemed. It just proved his potential. Working with him by his side would facilitate a lot of cases, let alone make them less boring.

“If I agree, will you teach me everything you know about ghosts?”

The answer was out of question for Dazai, knowing first-hand how lost you felt when nobody was there to guide. But what he actually said differed from his train of thoughts. “Of course. You will need to know anyway to be prepared for every situation.”

“Then I’ll work with you.”

A bright grin spread over Dazai’s face. He didn’t know what he would have done if he had said no. Bouncing on his feet he extended a hand to Chuuya.

“Oh Chuuya, that’s wonderful! Then it’s a deal?!”

“Deal.” At Dazai’s exaggerated happiness he rolled his eyes but took his hand nevertheless and squeezed it. To a successful partnership!

“Oi, Chuuya, we have to celebrate sometime!”
“Not today! I want to go home.” Chuuya said quickly, clearly unenthusiastic about it.

Dazai didn’t even try to be subtle about his disappointment and pouted, but Chuuya likely was tired and needed time to process, he got that. Not everyone came round with as little sleep as he did, sometimes he forgot. Dazai reached into his pocket, pulling out the banknotes he had received.

“Then let me just give me your share of-“

At the sight of them, Chuuya instantly shook his head.

“Keep them, I don’t need them.”

“But you’ve earned them,” Dazai insisted. He had just employed the shorter man, it was his duty to compensate him.

But Chuuya was adamant, “Believe me, money is no concern of mine.”

“Then why do you need a job?”

Chuuya shrugged. “I am bored”

How interesting. A young man for whom money is no concern, although unemployed until mere minutes ago and bored at all times. It added up with the stories Atsushi had told him whenever they met. Chuuya appeared to be a pain in the ass to the officers, taking up precious time with minor incidents.

Nodding absentmindedly, Dazai pocketed the bills again. In his head he went through multiple possibilities how Chuuya financed his life but nothing he came up with seemed fitting.

“I have to take a turn here.”

Chuuya’s voice pulled him out of thoughts. Focusing, Dazai realized they had reached a crossroad and Chuuya had come to a halt. The time had just passed so quickly.

“Oh, then I’ll text you when the next case comes up.”

“Alright, see you then. Good night.” The parting somehow awkward, Chuuya waved at Dazai and then he headed down the street.

“Good night, Chuuya” he said just loud enough for him to hear.

Little did Chuuya know that Dazai wouldn’t have good night. Having heard rumors from an old friend, he wanted to find out more on his own. Some matters were too threatening, too dark, to be casted aside. But Chuuya had no reason to know yet, he would find out sooner or later.

Dazai watched him disappear into the dark of the night, before going his own way.

*_*_*_*_*_*

The ring of the doorbell announced the arrival of the awaited visitor. Having been wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, Chuuya got caught in it as he shot to his feet and stumbled, almost falling over.
“God damn it,” he swore, trying to escape the self-made prison. When he finally managed to kick the blanket out of the way he hurried to the front door. While he had known she would visit him today, he hadn’t anticipated her coming so soon; he still had been lounging, scrolling through social media on his phone in sweat pants and a shabby t-shirt. Though she had seen him in worse, he would have liked to look at least remotely put together and not as if he hadn’t left home for days.

A look through the spyhole confirmed his assumption on who stood outside and he opened the door. Iffy eyes inspected him before Kouyou sighed, the accompanying smile giving away her amusement.

“It had been too optimistic to think you would have found yourself a practical occupation.”

“Good afternoon to you too,” Chuuya rolled his eyes, “The faith you have in me is very much appreciated, thank you. Come in.”

He stepped aside to let her in, closing the door behind her and he gave her a welcoming hug. Judging by the suit she wore, she likely had headed straight from work to his place. Maybe that was the reason for her early arrival because usually she came in the evening and he would prepare dinner for the both of them.

It was part of a weekly ritual they had established years ago when Chuuya had moved out of her place. And when she needed to come earlier she would usually send him at least a text message. Although wondering, Chuuya didn’t mind. He enjoyed her company. Would he have to cook lunch now, or had lunchtime already passed?

As he walked into the kitchen to prepare some tea, he quickly redid his ponytail, while Kouyou took her usual seat at the table from where she could watch Chuuya doing his ‘magic’, as she called it. Cooking had always been his thing, not hers, even though she had tried on multiple occasions. But they had soon decided it would be easier for them to have Chuuya cook or order take out instead of eating burned pasta.

Chuuya heard her slumping down with a huff, followed by a thud. Casting a glance at her he saw her resting her head on the table, eyes closed and hands dangling off the side. The sight made him laugh. Only a few knew her outside of work where she wasn’t the hard business woman she appeared to be to everyone else. There was a relaxed, even dorky side to her, which he had always preferred.

“Had a rough day?” he asked from the kitchen while putting on the tea.

A loud groan echoed from the other room, and Chuuya mentally prepared for another story of her incapable coworkers, of which she apparently had more than enough. Sometimes he asked why she didn’t simply fire the most annoying ones. She always replied that they had good qualities as well. She would know.

Chuuya poured the tea into two cups and carried them into the kitchen, where he put them down on the table and took place across Kouyou. Kouyou sat up straight as soon as she smelled her favorite Hojicha tea and took a sip, humming in pleasure as the hot liquid ran down her throat.

“Gosh, exactly what I needed.”

“Thought so. Care to tell me what happened this time?” Chuuya nipped at his own drink, too hot for him to down it instantly.
Kouyou shrugged out of her pink blazer and draped it over the back of the chair. Chuuya recognized the set that included equally pink slacks. He had seen her wearing multiple times before. Pink had always been the color that suited her most, and she knew exactly how to use it to her benefit. She only wore that suit when big deals were to be made. And something apparently went wrong with one of those today.

Oh. That’s the reason for her exhaustion.

Letting her face drop into her hands and dragging them down, Kouyou groaned again.

“Don’t get me started.”

Chuuya leaned over the table to nudge her arm in an encouraging manner.

“Come on, I want to know why you surprised me that early in the day.”

Her hands dropped to the teacup and she shot him a cold glare. “It’s two in the afternoon. That’s not early.”

“I had a long night, for me it is.”

She raised an eyebrow in question. “Please don’t tell me you got yourself arrested again.”

“No that was two days ago.”

“Chuuya!”

He felt bad as soon as she looked at him full of disappointment. He knew he had told her he would try to improve his behavior and cut down the illegal stuff, but until now it had been hard for him.

Stealing was his personal drug and he truly wasn’t bad at it, seeing as he got away with it more often than not, getting the chance to return the items discreetly. It made him feel everything he yearned for - the rush of adrenaline, fear of getting caught, the confirmation of being able to outsmart people made him feel alive in a way not even skydiving did. Not that he would jump out a plane ever again. When his parachute hadn’t opened, he had already seen his body smashed to pieces on the ground, tattered beyond identification. He had a need for adventure, not a death wish. To this day, an icy shiver ran down his spine whenever he remembered the moment.

However, he assumed his habits would change in the next few days if Dazai got enough cases to take up his time and kept him busy.

Speaking of the waste of bandages, he had bombarded him with text messages the entire day. Better to say, he had sent him multiple memes relating to ghosts and the more Chuuya ignored him, the more pictures he got, some of them stupid enough be funny again and making Chuuya laugh. Not that he would admit to anyone, especially not to Dazai.

Then it seemed to dawn on Kouyou.

“If you haven’t been with the police last night, what did you do?”

“Make a guess.”

A mysterious grin spread on Chuuya’s face. Although his world got flipped-turned upside down in the last twenty-four hours, the fact that he found a job, even if he hadn’t actively been searching for one, was something he was proud of. It might be an extraordinary occupation, but what he did
had purpose nevertheless.

Kouyou’s eyes grew wide.

“Have you found a job?”

When he nodded, she literally threw her hands into the air.

“Finally! You found use of your time! What do you do?”

He stared at her. He hadn’t thought about that yet. How did you explain that you were a ghost-hunter to somebody who had no idea about the existence of ghosts? He really didn’t want her world to shatter like his did and he wanted her to think that he had gone mad even less. Carefully, he picked his next words.

“Let’s say, I help people.”

“How?”

“We get rid of their problems.” His words were final.

Kouyou knew better than to pry further. If Chuuya had decided on keeping silent, she wouldn’t be able to change his mind. Instead she picked up on something else.

“We?”

“Yes, I work with a partner. His name is Dazai.”

He didn’t know why he told her his name, she wouldn’t know him anyway. And yet he did. But she left it that, only nodded in affirmation.

“I’m glad. Maybe things will change for the better now.”

“Things weren’t bad before either.”

He received no response. The woman simply continued to sip her tea, looking at Chuuya over the rim of the cup, that gaze just too familiar to him.

‘If you say so.’

To avoid any further conversation about the topic, Chuuya quickly changed the subject, honestly curious.

“Now tell me, what happened today.”

Rolling her eyes, she held out the empty cup, almost hitting him in the nose hadn’t he backed away last second, but acted as if she hadn’t noticed. It was only fair; several years ago he would do the exact same thing, now it was just one of her odd ways to show how much she cared.

“Only if you make me another tea. Will need it to help my blood pressure.”

Chuuya shook his head in disapproval but took the cup nonetheless and went to fix another one. Who would be to deny such a simple request?

“You have put up with me for almost ten years now. If your blood pressure survived me, it will surely survive a shitty day at work,” he said.
He heard her chuckling from the table.

“You might be right. But my day was more than stressful, just so you know.”

“Then why don’t you finally tell me about it?” He put down the second cup.

“You are so persistent. But fine. Today we wanted to settle a deal with a private investor, who had plans on building up a new residential district just a little out of town and needed a corporation partner. A huge amount of money was in it for us. All we had to do was to sign off the final contracts. The investors waited in the conference room and I asked that new apprentice of ours to bring me the papers on my desk. And guess what. That little shithead had mistaken them for wastepaper and shredded them! My lovely prepared contracts landed in the trash!”

Exasperated, she let her head fall back which had Chuuya crackling at last, holding his stomach in laughter. Of course such things happened to Kouyou; she never had luck with interns. As far as he knew, she hadn’t had one competent apprentice since she took over the company. Sure, they were new to the business world and essentially there to learn, but that didn’t make those stories any less fun.

“Oh just you wait, it gets better,” Kouyou continued, “Turns out, Higuchi was already out for today, and she had misfiled the document that included the contract. Do you know how long it took me to find it and print it anew? Half. An. Hour,” Kouyou made sure to stress every single word. “The investor was pissed. I think he even contemplated calling off the deal! I managed to calm him down, but it was a close call.”

Chuuya was gasping for air. Only Kouyou managed to ride herself into such situations.

She put her head into one hand and grumbled something about the world being unfair to her before continuing, less upset now.

“Tonight, Hirotsu throws a party in honor of his promotion. By the way, also the reason why I’m here so soon, I have to be there in early evening. The apprentice will be there too. Would it be too much to spill a drink over him, ‘accidentally’?” To highlight the last word she drew quotation-marks into the air with her fingers.

The image of a classy Kouyou being clumsy and stumbling as she spills her drink draws a snort from him as clumsy definitely didn’t exist in her vocabulary.

“You know Chuuya, you should come too. You haven’t shown up to any of our events lately - no, in over half a year to be exact. Join me.” The smile she wore changed into something akin to sorrow, bordering to pleading.

His chuckles died down immediately and his smile turned into a scowl, while he shook his head in adamant refusal.

“You know I hate those. Most of the people don’t remember or recognize me anymore, it’s always awkward. I can do without that.”

“Oh come on, please. We can make it fun. You can watch me spilling a drink over an intern. Isn’t that worth coming?” Kouyou tried to coax him into agreeing.

The idea of that sounded tempting but it didn’t suffice to make Chuuya reconsider. He wouldn’t come.

“Thanks Kouyou, but I would very much prefer to stay at home.”
Right in this moment, his phone buzzed several times in a row and Chuuya got up with a groan to get it from the coffee table next to the couch, where he had left it when Kouyou had arrived. That could only be Dazai, sending him another bunch of memes he didn’t need or want to see. Intending to activate silence mode, his eyes briefly skimmed over the received messages from ‘Mackerel’ – the name being a tribute to the man’s nasty aftershave.

**Mackerel**

[2:11 pm] *picture*

[2:12 pm] Look at that old lady

Want to meet one too?

Tonight, 9:15 pm, St. Johns

Will send you exact address later

[2:13 pm] Apparently she hides tabletop

Dazai – his savior. He had texted just in time because now he had a valid reason to decline Kouyou’s offer.

“Sorry Kouyou, but it seems I have to work tonight.”

She glared at him. “You are kidding me.”

“No, I’m not. We’ve got a job.” Chuuya still hadn’t looked up from his mobile, rereading the messages again to get some more information for them but of course nothing new came up.

Kouyou sighed.

“You are freed from this one. But the next time you have to accompany me, okay?”

His head snapped up to look at her and he was ready to fight her on that but the way she pouted at him, eyes pleading, he really couldn’t say no again. She had asked him to join so many times by now and every time he had refused. He would be able to come with her once, for the sake of making her happy, although he didn’t understand why it was so important to her.

“Alright, I promise.”

Her gratitude would be worth the pain he was going to suffer, at least he told himself. Pleased by his answer, she cheered with happiness, grinning like a child who had just gotten a lollipop.

“Damn, and thought I was supposed to be the child here,” Chuuya commented.

“Shut up, I had a terrible day, let me be happy about the little things in life. Now, sit down, I have more to complain about the apprentice.”

Chuuya did as he was told and for the next few hours, he listened to her talking about the newest gossip going on in the company until Kouyou headed off to the event and Chuuya slowly got ready for his second night out on the field.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading and your support! Feel free to tell me what you think down in the comments.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks for almost 600 hits and 60 kudos <3 It makes me more than happy to know that people actually like what I write.

This chapter marks the end of what I call "The introduction". Next chapter, the story will take a slight turn and move on to the heavier plot.

Have fun reading

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Falling into a routine with Dazai took seven days. Every morning Chuuya received a ‘good-morning’- text, along with a ghost meme. Chuuya ignored him until midday, just to get annoyed enough by the constant vibrating of his phone to respond with the best insult he could come up with, to which he received an equally creative answer.

‘Half-eaten sandwich’ must be his favorite so far.

After lunch Chuuya took care of regular chores and in early afternoon Dazai sent him information about today’s case, to which he headed sometime between early evening and nightfall where they took care of ghosts messing around with households.

Firstly, Dazai nullified their outra-mundus, no, extra-manane, no... whatever energy, then either Chuuya or the both of them spoke to the spirit and help them to get to peace. Only once they failed to do so because neither of them agreed to prepare a bath full of pig-blood.

Chuuya would have never expected people to have such curious desires. It was more than disturbing.

Apparently, Dazai didn’t have specific days off. Whenever he received a call he would be there as soon as possible, even if that meant working the entire week. One day, they took care of two cases. At some point Chuuya asked if he always received so many assignments and Dazai had just shrugged. Some weeks yes, and then they were weeks with only 2 calls. It varied. Ghosts enjoyed autumn, he had said, because he recorded increased activity during the season.

Working with Dazai turned out to be … interesting, to say at least.

As long as it was just the two of them Dazai would start teasing him, either for his clothes or his height, or his short temper when he already had annoyed the hell out of Chuuya who would give him a more or less gentle shove to the shoulder. Of course Chuuya didn’t let a chance slip to get back at him and the bantering would keep going on.

Even though they knew each other for mere days, no awkwardness stood between them, to Chuuya’s surprise. Usually he had a hard time warming up to strangers, distrust and doubt too deeply anchored inside. But Dazai’s obnoxious ways made it more than difficult to keep him at an arm’s length and as much as he bugged and upset Chuuya with his terrible jokes, he amused him just the same.
Besides, Dazai had already seen Chuuya having a mental breakdown amidst a busy street. Since then, any effort to keep his emotions down would have been pointless anyway.

Chuuya knew that Dazai found great pleasure in riling him up too. Around Chuuya, Dazai smiled a lot.

But that would change the moment the door opened. In an instant, Dazai’s demeanor would adjust and he wouldn’t let any emotions show, replacing them with an overly polite smile only reserved for customers. Chuuya himself had never received it, not even when they had first met.

On the third case, he became aware of how Dazai’s shoulders tensed up and his back straightened when he faced a client.

On the fourth, he noticed that when he laughed around clients, which rarely happened but yet did, it sounded differently than when they were alone. He couldn’t tell in what way it differentiated; he simply knew it did.

Dazai became an entire new person around clients, remaining objective, not making a single stupid joke of his until they were alone again.

Chuuya had picked up on his act after the case with the tableware-hiding lady. Dazai had listened with interest, nodded in understanding and asked question when needed. But as soon as they had been left alone with the granny, Dazai scrunched up his nose and made a comment about how ugly those dishes were.

It turned out that the old woman had dementia and forgotten that her husband had died years prior to her, so she kept waiting for him. Therefore, she also couldn’t grasp why her tableware didn’t stand in the kitchen cabinet anymore as the new owners had put it into a vitrine. It was a mystery to Chuuya why one would keep so useless belongings of a deceased person that hadn’t even been a relative, but what did he know.

After Dazai had done his little trick, of which Chuuya just couldn’t figure out how he did it, the both of them needed over two hours to figure out her past and get through to her, explaining how her partner wouldn’t come and she had to leave to see him again.

His patience had already yielded as they had been repeating the same things over and over again, when she finally, to Chuuya’s relief, got a clear moment and processed what they had been trying to tell her and left for good.

At Chuuya’s enervated ‘for fucks sake, she’s finally gone’, Dazai didn’t know any better than to laugh, making fun of his exhausted state. When the door opened and the client came in, summoned by Chuuya’s exclamation, the laughter died down instantly, a blank face taking its place. Since then, Chuuya had paid attention to Dazai’s mannerisms and picked up that pattern.

He didn’t blame Dazai in the slightest though. He knew he himself acted differently around all the businessman and customers he had had to encounter over the years than he did around his friends. Just because Dazai’s clients didn’t have money to burn - although they paid Dazai more than enough – that didn’t mean that Dazai had to treat them with any less respect. Same situation, different context.

And while Chuuya had no issues with Dazai, the joking Dazai seemed just more human, if it made sense.

The seventh day after his recruitment, a feeling indicating something amiss settled in Chuuya’s
stomach the moment he woke up. He couldn’t pinpoint why, but it was there. The feeling was confirmed when he rolled over to the side to pick up his phone from the night stand, checking for new messages. Apart from Dazai’s usual texts he had received multiple from Akutagawa who almost never texted him.

**Akutagawa**

[9:11 am] Three options
[9:12 am] 1. You have stolen from the wrong people, having gotten yourself killed  
   2. You got into prison before having had the chance to contact me  
   3. You have replaced me

It had been a fortune since Chuuya had kept out of trouble for more than four days; even Akutagawa had started to worry about him. He huffed at the thought of Akutagawa worrying about him- such an atypical emotion for the else so unbothered man.

**Chuuya**

[10:43 am] I’m not dead, not in prison and I have not replaced you
[10:44 am] I’m currently busy, you’ll get a break from me.

**Akutagawa**

[10:45 am] Don’t tell me you quit your delinquent-life

**Chuuya**

[10:46 am] I might have
   You free tonight?  
   Then you can catch up

**Akutagawa**

[10:47 am] Can’t, already occupied  
   I’m free on Saturday though

**Chuuya**

[10:48 am] Saturday it is  
   See you

Dazai surely wouldn’t mind if he asked for a day off; he had told him just to ask if something got in his way and he did owe Akutagawa an explanation, especially since with Chuuya’s new job, parts of Akutagawa’s income were omitted. They would have to sort that out as well.
He had yet to open Dazai’s message when a new one from the shithead came in. Would he ever get a break?

**Mackerel**

[10:50 am] Farmer’s gone wild
   Keeps digging up the garden
   Threatens owners with pitchfork
   Can you be in Powell Valley at 2?

Checking the time, Chuuya had no doubt he would make it, getting there would take less than an hour. What an odd case; the first one he had to attend at day light because for unknown reasons spirits generally preferred nighttime.

He quickly answered Dazai that he would be there on time before rolling out of bed to get ready for the day.

*_**_.*_*_*

Honestly, when he had read about a farmer, he had expected to come to a real farm and he was not disappointed. Old and painted brick red, the farmhouse met every aspect of the cliche-picture you had in mind. The wide-open fields surrounding it perfected the image.

Dazai was already waiting for him at the entrance gate, kicking some stones and humming a tune to himself. To some extend it happened to be almost weird to see Dazai in full daylight after only having seen him in darker hours for a week, all tall and clad in light colors, dark hair reflecting the sunlight. Dazai immediately lit up when Chuuya’s car pulled over and parked on roadside.

“Chuuya, I almost thought you wouldn’t come!”

“Don’t worry, I have always been on time. Should we?” The car keys were pocketed inside of his bomber jacket while he approached; he wanted to feel its familiar weight in order to not lose it anywhere. If it fell out on this huge areal, he would have trouble finding it again.

Dazai extended him an elbow as if expecting him to loop his arm through and Chuuya gave him a look of dismissal, lips pursed in exaggerated disgust.

“Surely not.”

“Oh come on, Chuuya is such a killjoys!”

Dazai didn’t see Chuuya rolling his eyes as he already headed to the front door.

“Hurry, or we’ll be late.”

Reaching the door first Chuuya got the honor of knocking first, usually reserved for Dazai and as he waited for it to open the other appeared next to him. The finger that poked him into the ribcage came unexpected and Chuuya immediately squirmed before jerking away.
“Oi, why? Why are you like this?” He dodged the second finger proficiently as he whined. Dazai always tried a second time.

“Because teasing Chuuya is fun.”

Chuuya wished he could wipe that grin off his face with a similarly cruel action but he had yet to find a sensitive spot of Dazai’s who had only needed three days to find out how ticklish Chuuya was at the ribcages. He would get to him, one day. And then it would take Dazai by surprise. Chuuya swore by that.

The door opened and on autopilot Dazai stopped smiling, introducing himself and Chuuya to the young lady called Agatha Christie who greeted them and asked them to enter.

This week alone Chuuya had seen more living rooms than ever before, all equally unique in their own way, but none furnished in a way he approved of, this one being too rustic for his taste.

The procedure already familiar to Chuuya, they took seat in a couch so the client faced them and could explain their concern. The lady wasted no time and got straight to the facts.

“There is a ghost at our farm and he is a big problem.”

No shit. Of course there was, or they wouldn’t be here.

“He does all sorts of things. He digs up our raised-bed, he hides our equipment. One time my husband forgot the key in the tractor. I watched it drive on our property without driver. It must have been his doing. He also pointed a pitchfork at me. And the worst: He keeps messing with our chickens. He hides and destroys their eggs; from time to time he even slaughters them. The blood has ruined more laundry on the clothesline than I can afford to repurchase. I have no nerve to deal with him anymore. I want you to get rid of him.”

Chuuya sat a little straighter under her stare. His fingers searched for the hem of his gloves, but today he had forgotten them at home for the first time in forever. He felt weirdly naked without them whenever he was reminded of that.

Albeit appearing innocent and soft hearted, Agatha seemed to know what she wanted if she dared to command them in such a way. For some reason she wasn’t afraid of the unwelcomed guest, she simply hated his presence.

Unprepared to meet a woman with such a strong presence, Chuuya associated the word ‘intimidating’ with her. He actually should know better than to underestimate woman, having lived with the most badass one he knew half of his live.

“You keep telling the ghost ‘he’. How do you know it’s a man?” Dazai asked.

“I’ve seen him once,” Agatha answered.

“But you have never before seen a ghost, to my understanding.” Dazai inquired.

“No, just that one time, when he yelled at me and slung an egg at me.”

“A violent one.”

Chuuya snorted. Obviously the farmer had no good will, or he wouldn’t threaten people with a pitchfork.
He pretended to not notice how Dazai eyed him from the side for a split second.

“We’ll try our best. Where do we find the ghost?”

Agatha took a look at her wrist watch.

“It’s shortly after two. He should be in the tool shed. If not then he’s still with the chicken.”

“He has a schedule?” Chuuya asked dumbfounded.

“Well, yeah.” The woman simply shrugged as if there was no reason for Chuuya to ask. For her, that might be the norm, but Chuuya didn’t get it. Since when did ghosts have schedules? The ones throughout the week didn’t have one.

He didn’t get to question further, because Dazai took over again.

“Thank you, we will find our way round. We’ll return when we’re done.”

Chuuya had to follow him out the backdoor into the courtyard just to almost bump into him when he stopped on the porch, avoiding the collision last moment with a quick step to the side. The faint odor of dung reached his nose.

A grim expression on his face, Dazai looked around, searching for something, which encouraged Chuuya to do just the same, looking out for the mentioned tool shed.

He spotted a little shed just behind the garden. That must be it. The farmer would be a great change to the latest cases. While the others had been interesting, after Q none had been nearly equally exciting.

“Dazai, there. Let’s go.”

But the man only sighed and didn’t move an inch, hands buried in the pockets of his beige signature coat.

“What’s up?” Chuuya asked.

The entire week Dazai had been so eager to take care of cases, even when Chuuya thought they weren’t that thrilling after all. Why he hesitated now, he couldn’t understand.

“Violent ghosts may be fun. But the ones who have a schedule can be dangerous. Most of the time they develop a rage at those who dare to disturb their life. For non-sighted people to see ghosts is rare. That Agatha has seen him indicates a strong extra-mundane energy. We must proceed with caution; those have caused me a great share of pain in the past.”

Chuuya only rolled his eyes. He didn’t need a lecture; risk had been his companion for years.

_Dangerous_. What could possibly happen? It was two against one. They would manage.

“You never seemed like the scared-guy type to me,” Chuuya crossed his arms, finding Dazai’s eyes to challenge him, “Besides, you have me. That’s the reason you hired me; to have your back. Remember?”

Dazai perked an eyebrow. “I’m not scared, I’m w-“

“So what’s the matter? Come on, time to get over with this.”
Dazai never got to finish what he wanted to say as Chuuya was already jogging towards the shed. Dazai would follow him, he knew.

The wooden door opened with a squeak and Chuuya feared it would fall out of the hinge, the upper one barely attached anymore. The wood’s rottenness caused a musty odor for which Chuuya hadn’t been prepared and he barely suppressed a cough. The cool and humid air caused goose bumps on his neck. It reminded him of the one time he got lost in the woods.

From the inside, the shed turned out to be bigger than it appeared from the outside, several small rooms appended at the back.

The only light source were two tiny windows which, however, blocked most of the light out with their muddied surfaces.

A rustle sounded through the shed. Somebody had to be in the back, most likely the farmer - or mice. But mice usually didn’t produce noise so loud.

He left the door open for Dazai to enter and proceeded to walk further into the shed to investigate the sound. Boxes stacked against the wall, hiding the huge cupboards behind them and in a corner Chuuya made out a chainsaw, the chain broken and the pieces curling on the ground. Too distracted by taking in the interior, the short moment of not paying attention to the floor in front of him let him run straight into a box full of pots. Maybe nobody would have even noticed if the pots weren’t metallic. The din they caused when abutting surprised Chuuya, making him flinch.

Damn it.

“Who’s there?”

Chuuya froze in place. He had intended to stay undiscovered until he caught glimpse of the yet to be sighted farmer and now he had blown his cover due to his inattentiveness. Because why would anything go as planned, right?

Heavy steps announced the approach of the farmer and Chuuya faced a man significantly taller than him, probably even taller than Dazai, face framed with long black hair. Chuuya had no time to waste a thought on why the farmer wore a white dress shirt and not the for a farmer typical dungarees because he came closer at a fast pace.

“Who are you?”

The deep voice got directly under Chuuya’s skin. It wasn’t friendly in any way and instead, the simple question sounded like a threat. Still coming closer, Chuuya slowly began stepping back in the direction of the still open door. He wouldn’t want to start a fight in such a cramped space. Chuuya’s eyes flickered down to the farmer’s hands. His grip enclosed the notorious pitchfork in one hand, while in the other he held a set of screwdrivers. It might as well have been a legit threat.

Hands held up high in defeat he tried to talk to the man.

“Hey, I’m Chuuya I – uh – I was actually looking for you!” He had no idea what to say. But apparently this hadn’t been right, because the pitchfork rose into Chuuya’s direction. Slowly but steadily he was nearing the exit.

“What are you doing on my ground?”

The pitchfork now hovered only inches away from his stomach.
Telling him that the farm belonged to somebody else now was definitely no option.

“Something came up and – and you weren’t at the door, so I came back here to see if I could find you!”

The man didn’t seem to buy it. He didn’t put the pitchfork down and Chuuya only dared to take shallow breaths, fearing that any more would make him touch the tool. But he only needed to get out; Dazai would wait for him outside to catch the farmer by surprise.

“What do you want?” The farmer narrowed his eyes.

Finally, he set foot on the gravel outside the shed and Chuuya was about to exhale, when he heard a voice; however, not next to the shed but behind him.

“Chuuya, are you alright? What were you – Oh shit.”

That summarized it pretty well.

“LIARS! You are thieves, you want to steal from me! But not with good old Lovecraft!”

Lovecraft? That must be how he called himself.

A screwdriver flew past his ear. Chuuya heard it swishing past him. He could barely turn around to see it land on the ground when the second one almost grazed his leg.

Lovecraft pulled the screwdrivers out of the set in an impressing speed, hurling one after another at Chuuya. Where Dazai was, he didn’t know, too occupied with avoiding tools. Some of them he dodged with ease, jumping to the side and ducking when one flew in his direction, but some came in such close concession, Chuuya had to put to use every bit of acrobatic skills he had whilst bending and avoiding screwdrivers. There was no end in sight. How many of those did he have?

“Get off my ground!”

The next one passed right through Chuuya’s legs. If he wasn’t misconceived, Lovecraft had started throwing them faster. He had to stop him, or they wouldn’t be able to achieve anything.

“Look – we are not thieves! We simply –“ Chuuya moved to the left, “wanted to talk to you.” He crouched “There’s no need for” – A step to the right, which also brought him closer to the farmer “violence.”

Every move he made was joined by a forwards movement, closing the distance between him and Lovecraft. The farmer clearly didn’t listen, his eyes blown wide enough for the white to show and mechanic motions reached for a screwdriver as soon as the one before had been darted. The best chance he had was to tackle him down so that Dazai could touch him and do his spell thing, then he couldn’t hurt them any longer. Everything else would come up later.

Chuuuya hadn’t seen the screwdriver coming that flew just by his shoulder and though he avoided it in the last moment, it caused him to lose his balance, sending him tumbling backwards. His backside hit the gravel hard, putting him out of action for a second. That second was long enough for Lovecraft to reach for the next screwdriver and sling it at Chuuya.

He had no time to doge or get up. That one would strike him.

Instinctively, Chuuya held his hands up in front of his face, eyes shut tightly. His entire body tensed and warmed up as he waited for the pain to strike.
But it didn’t come.

Somewhere behind him he heard his name being called.

Some more seconds passed, and Chuuya still felt no pain. He dared to open his eyes, blinking, before turning to look at Lovecraft. But his gaze got caught by his own hands.

A bright red aura surrounded bare hands. It tingled, Chuuya noticed.

He didn’t dare putting them down and as he leaned to the side to look past them and just an inch in front of his hands, multiple screwdrivers hovered vertically in the air as if stopped whilst flying. The picture was mesmerizing.

The red gleam reminded him of the one that emitted from Dazai whenever he extracted energy. This one just happened to be red.

Chuuya couldn’t avert his eyes from the image. Wait.

Those were his hands. His own bare hands.

And they were glowing red.

He pulled them out of their position abruptly to press them to his chest, the glow and warmth vanishing with the action. What had he just seen?

The screwdrivers that had still hung midair dropped to the ground, right in front of Chuuya’s feet and the sound they made cut loudly through the silence that had settled in the yard. Even Lovecraft had stopped his manic behavior to watch the scene playing out in front of him.

Chuuya didn’t know what to think.

He didn’t get to think.

A growling sound ripped through the air.

“Not only thieves but also guilty of witchcraft! You shall be damned!” Lovecraft’s voice howled through the bright day, as he raised the pitchfork and dashed forward for Chuuya.

However, he didn’t come far.

“All right, that’s enough.”

Blue light enveloped the farmer and Dazai who had gotten behind him, hand resting on the ghost’s shoulder - by now a well-known event for Chuuya. Except that now, it had a different effect on him.

When he previously had watched with fascination, it now seemed frightening in a way he couldn’t describe. But after seeing his own hands coated in a similar glow, he realized that something couldn’t be normal.

Because Chuuya hadn’t used a spell.

He hadn’t done anything. His hands simply did.

The blue glow wore off to disappear into Dazai’s hands and the now translucent farmer slumped down to the ground. He didn’t move anymore. Ghosts could pass out?
Wide-eyed, Chuuya watched Dazai wiping his hands on his coat as he inspected the ghost on the ground. A black shoe tried to nudge the body, but it passed right through it.

“He will be out for some more minutes. Extracting so much extra-mundane energy even wears the dead off.”

Only then he turned to face Chuuya, still sitting on the ground and unable to get up. Shock was anchored deeply into his limbs, and Chuuya had already averted his gaze. A hand extended, Chuuya twisted and turned it in all directions, searching for anything abnormal but his hand was perfectly fine. No fresh scars had formed and the glow didn’t return. Had he only imagined?

“Dazai, tell me I wasn’t hallucinating,” his voice carried a subtle trace of panic.

Dazai shook his head in response and an emotion in his face that resembled disbelief.

“Honestly. First you don’t even know you are sighted and now turns out you are gifted too! How old are you again?”

“Twenty-two?”

“How the hell do you live twenty-two years without knowing these things about yourself?”

“Gifted?” Another term Chuuya didn’t know. Was that what this was? A gift?

“Yes Chuuya, gifted. You have a special ability. Be happy, it saved your life today!” A lopsided grin spread over his face as he looked down at Chuuya from above. Some of Chuuya’s confusion yielded to anger and annoyance, a feeling of heat in his stomach that had gotten familiar a long time ago and was currently reserved for one specific person. Nails dug into the gravel.

“My hand covered in a red glow I knew nothing about just minutes ago. It could have injured me! So would you for once put your always so silvery tongue to use and tell me what the fuck just happened?” With every word his voice grew louder, all chaos that rummaged in Chuuya finding a vent to escape and by the end, Chuuya took quick, deep breaths to collect himself again. He closed his eyes and teeth bit down on the inner side of his lips in an attempt of grounding further. Lashing out wouldn’t bring him anywhere, but Dazai’s words would.

He focused on breathing steadily and after another deep exhale he looked at Dazai, all fury wiped from his face and replaced with an expression more pleading. He felt a faint burn in his eyes.

“Please, tell me what this is about. I deserve to know,” the words didn’t come out as confident as he had hoped.

The situation heavily resembled the incident from just a week ago, Chuuya knew, but what else should he do? This was about him, his life on the brink of taking a turn again when it had gotten out of whack just seven days ago.

Was it pity that lit up in Dazai’s eyes? Maybe, Chuuya didn’t care.

Dazai scrutinized him for several long moments, face pensive but then extended a hand to help Chuuya up.

“Come, let’s sit. I’ll show you what this is about.” His gaze flicked to the still blacked out ghost. “He won’t wake up for some more time anyway.”

When Chuuya had gotten up, Dazai still didn’t let go of his hand, not even at Chuuya’s gentle tug,
and led him to a bench, pulling him down with him as he sat. Only then he loosened his grip, allowing Chuuya to curl his hands in his lap and rub them against each other. He didn’t dare to do anything else with them in case the glow would recur. Furthermore, skin-to-skin-contact on his hands felt odd. He had been wearing his gloves for such a long time that every touch without them just didn’t sit right with him, making his skin prickle.

“Focus on my hand,” Dazai said, extending one between the both of them, palm open and facing upwards.

“An ability is some kind of superpower if you want a simple explanation. While only a minor part of human population is sighted, even less is gifted. The abilities always relate to extra-mundane energy in some kind. You still with me?” Dazai made sure Chuuya still listened.

Chuuya quickly nodded but remained focused on his hand. He expected something to happen every second.

“Good. My ability is called ‘No longer human’. It allows me to extract extra-mundane energy, but you already know that,” Dazai explained with his typical calmness.

Quickly Chuuya’s eyes shot up. “So all this time you have been using your ability?”

“Yeah. What have you thought?”

“That you used some kind of spell.”

Dazai uttered a huff. “The day I use a holy spell again should be damned. Anyway, as I said, the ability only works when I touch ghosts. That doesn’t mean I can’t activate if I want to.”

He was still talking when a small puddle of known blue light gathered in his hands out of nothing, covering the space between them in a blue glow. It caused a shiver to run through Chuuya’s body. Seeing it, without any reason for it to be there, had his stomach tightening.

“You can touch it if you want, it won’t do anything to you.”

Unwinding his hands, Chuuya slowly moved a finger into Dazai’s palm and into the blue light.

“It’s cold,” Chuuya noted to his surprise.

“I know but right now it just stings a little. You should be able to do this too. Try it.”

Big eyes looked at Dazai from under ruffled bangs. “How?”

Dazai tapped a finger on his knee in thought.

“Right. How shall I explain this?” he muttered. “Extend a hand. Exactly. Now, close your eyes.” Chuuya let himself be guided by his voice.

“How has it felt when it appeared before? Recall that feeling. Take a deep breath, focus on your body. Do you feel something you can’t place? Some kind of energy? Imagine pushing it into your hands, let it collect in your fingers.”

Recalling what had happened, a pinching and at the same time tingling feeling settled in his chest and while he was sure he had never felt it before, it didn’t feel foreign. Was that what Dazai was talking about? Giving it a try, he formed a picture in his mind where a red ball of energy flowed up his veins, into his arms and reached the fingertips. The tingling followed path until he believed it to
be in his hands.

“Yes, exactly like that,” Dazai’s voice had gone soft. “Mesmerizing. Look.”

In Chuuya’s palm an orb of red had formed, just as it had in Dazai’s and the light pulsated in a steady rhythm. He had done it, only by willpower. This was truly his own doing. His own ability. Dazai reached out for it and extended a finger into the light, keeping it there for some time.

“Yours is warm, almost like a heating lamp.”

Of all things Dazai could have chosen to compare his ability to, he had to choose a fucking heating lamp?

Chuuya inhaled sharply and as he exhaled he sent another ball of energy down the arm into his hand. He had no idea how he knew it would work. He simply knew.

All of a sudden the orb expanded, tripling in size and causing Dazai to pull his hand away with a surprised jerk. Having watched Dazai’s ability multiple times this week, he noticed that his differed not only in color and temperature but while Dazai’s blue light would extend into winding ribbons, the red edges faded out into smoke, dancing around the both of them and lashing out with every exhale.

“Did you do this on purpose?”

Dazai holding his hand midair, away from Chuuya, and surprise showing all over his face, drew a grin from Chuuya.

“I would never.”

“How can you go from being an emotional wreck to an utter dipshit in no time?” Some tension that had been between them and hadn’t been notice by Chuuya yielded.

“How can you go from being a considerate gentleman to being an annoying dickhead within seconds?” Chuuya retorted.

Dazai smirked. “I am always a gentleman.”

“Remind me of that the next time you let me face a crank on my own.”

The red light flared up again and excitement overcame Chuuya at the sight, the initial fear wearing off. He found great delight in letting it flicker and knowing that he was the one doing it. If it related to extra-mundane energy only, then it shouldn’t be able to hurt him. But it made him wonder what exactly it did.

“For the record, I was checking out the coop. I couldn’t know he was in the shed.” Dazai said before he fell silent. Chuuya heard his jaw cracking as he moved it to the side in thought before he inspected Chuuya with tilted head.

“You know what I just can’t understand? Your ability must be full-fledged if you are able to summon it already. Not many can do that at first try. Then why has it never shown before?”

Chuuya had multiple explanations for that. For once, he had never faced a ghost intentionally before, even less he had needed to defend himself from such. And how should he evoke something he didn’t even know existed?
Yet, the ability felt so natural, as if it had been there his entire life, lying dormant deep inside him until it was awakened anew to return more vibrant than ever before.

He let the light fade out to have a better look at his hands. Nothing had changed today. Everything had remained the same, except he didn’t wear his gloves.

“I’m not wearing my gloves,” he mumbled more to himself than anything else.

“How?”

“My gloves, I have forgotten them at home. I have been wearing them almost every day since I was ten.”

“I have so many questions now.” Dazai tilted his head even more.

A finger traced an invisible line on the left wrist where the hem of the glove would usually sit.

“Guess what, same here. I’ve been wearing them since I got a pair from my parents years back. It’s become a habit ever since.”

“You think it has something to do with this? We should test that theory.”

Chuuya glared at him. “I don’t have them with me, dumbass.”

“Not now. Tomorrow maybe. Now we must take care of more pressing matters. Look who arose, it’s the sleeping beauty,” Dazai said.

Lovecraft struggled with getting up onto his feet, staggering around as he pushed himself up but as soon as he stood, infuriated eyes stared them down and a finger pointed directly at Dazai, who did not as much as blink at him.

“You. You will pay for this!”

He reached for the pitchfork lying in the dust just to have his hand slip right through it and his rage visibly scaled up at the discovery. His mouth puckered into a grimace.

“You are the devil. What have you done?” Lovecraft pushed the sleeves of his shirt up while heading straight for Dazai.

Chuuya watched him coming closer and next to him Dazai sighed, clearly having no desire to put up with the farmer any longer, a much more interesting subject on his mind. None bothered to get out of his way, knowing he couldn’t cause harm anymore.

When Lovecraft found out himself by trying to grab Dazai by his collar but failing to do so, a glint of fury lit up in his eyes. Chuuya would have been alerted to fight any moment under different circumstances.

Standing tall in front of them, Lovecraft seemed to contemplate how he should precede without his cutting gaze on them ever wavering. He appeared even taller now as Chuuya was sitting on the bench. Chuuya had to put his head back to get a proper look at him.

Dazai broke the silence.

“Lovecraft, are you aware of the fact that you are no longer alive?”

Lovecraft’s lips pulled up in a snarl.
“You are a delusional liar.”

“I’m no such. There is a reason you cannot touch me.” With ease he put his arm through Lovecraft’s stomach, whose eyes widened in disbelief, replacing the anger. “What are you doing?”

“Showing you how dead you are. Any wishes you have, maybe we can fulfill them so you can leave.”

This was the first time Chuuya witnessed Dazai being so upfront about the topic to the ghosts. Normally, he would have approached with more caution and shown some empathy for them while with Lovecraft, Chuuya had the impression Dazai was more than annoyed and wanted to have him gone as soon as possible.

Lovecraft’s eyebrows furrowed.

“This is my land, my wish is to have you gone and if –“

“This is no longer your land, it now belongs to somebody else and you have caused them nothing but trouble,” Dazai said.

“To my land I can to whatever I please!”

“Again: It’s not yours anymore. And what will you do now? You cannot touch a single object.”

Silent, Lovecraft took stock of the current situation, reality having reached him. Dazai’s forthright approach seemed to work and Chuuya decided to let him handle it, he had it under control. He had become a quiet watcher.

“I won’t let this land get corrupted by anyone else’s hands.”

The stare-off between Lovecraft and Dazai lasted only seconds but Dazai went by ‘the smarter one gives way’ when he closed his eyes and exhaled loudly enough for Chuuya to hear it.

“Okay then, have fun keeping everything under control without being able to actually do anything. We won’t bother you any longer.”

Although the situation confused Chuuya, he got up and followed Dazai inside, an action occurring more often than he would like to; he always followed Dazai. While the ghost wouldn’t cause any further inconveniences to anybody, Chuuya had doubts about turning his back to Lovecraft just like that. They didn’t even know his deepest desire yet, what if they could have helped him? It bothered Chuuya.

“Shouldn’t we have made him vanish?” He pried.

“We won’t be able,” Dazai stated matter-of-factly. His expression had gone blank, not conveying any emotion at all. Something in his eyes had changed. They were darker than Chuuya had ever seen them before. It made him wary.

“What makes you so sure of that?”

Dazai opened the door into the house and let Chuuya enter before he did. “I just know. He isn’t ready to accept the truth that he has died over two centuries ago.”

Now that Dazai mentioned, Chuuya realized why the famer’s clothing had seemed odd to him. The sleeves had been covered in ruffles and the pants were unusually highly buttoned up, which made
sense if they were from a long elapsed time.

Dazai continued, “And did you hear how highly he talked about the farm? His wish most likely relates to it, we couldn’t have done anything in that case. Trust me if I say: He is not worth any more of our time. We won’t be able to get everyone their happy ending, that’s just how it is.”

As much as he hated it, Chuuya had to agree with Dazai after some short seconds of rethinking. His conclusions were logical and to be honest, he had wanted to get away from the farmer anyway, the memory of almost having been injured still fresh in his mind. Getting the farmer off his mind would be nice. That didn’t mean that leaving the case unsolved didn’t bother him at least a little.

Instead of bringing them to the lady, Dazai led Chuuya to the front door. Chuuya must have looked confused because amusement flashed over his face, the dark expression completely gone.

“Wait here, I’ll just quickly wrap it up with Agatha, then we can leave.”

Dazai didn’t wait for a response before he went out to look for her. Chuuya wasn’t pleased with being cut from the final conversation but arguing over something so minor wasn’t worth the effort, so he waited. It took Dazai only a few minutes to return with a stack of cash in his hands which he tried to hand to Chuuya – a silent question. Chuuya shook his head in dismissal and Dazai put it into his own pocket. Although Chuuya had rejected any money the entire week, Dazai still made the effort to offer every time.

“What did you tell her?” Chuuya asked as they left and strolled over to the entrance gate.

“Just that the ghost won’t bother her ever again.”

“You didn’t tell her he was still there?”

“Does she need to know?”

No. She didn’t. It didn’t mean that withholding the full truth from her wouldn’t upset him.

But he had noticed early that Dazai had a way of finding his way around the truth, just as he did. To complain about something he recognized in himself – he wasn’t entitled to do so. At least Dazai hadn’t lied to the woman.

The sun had slowly begun to set but still stood high enough for it to be early afternoon. Chuuya contemplated what he would do with his first free night of the week. Now that the rush of adrenaline wore off, exhaustion tugged at his muscles, a faint burn shooting through them at some of his movements.

A similar exhaustion fogged his mind, the information he had gathered today overwhelming and difficult to sort. In his mind he already imagined himself in the hot tub with a book and a glass of red wine to distract himself from today’s events. He could deal with anything else tomorrow.

As they reached the car, Chuuya pulled out the key and pushed the button for it to unlock.

“Chuuya, I know you are probably tired, but I actually wanted to ask you something.”

At first he didn’t know what jarred him; he only understood when the man scratched the back of his head, avoiding any eye-contact. The words didn’t sound as they belonged into Dazai’s mouth, too humble for the man, too tentative. Dazai never asked for permission to speak.

“Sure?” The answer was more of a question than a proper response.
“You’ve been working with me for a week. I thought we might celebrate that. Some friends of mine meet up at a bar tonight, and you are invited to join, if you want to.”

Chuuya considered. Although the hot tub tempted him, he hadn’t had much time lately to go out and socialize. An opportunity to drink and not feel like a lonely alcoholic also sounded alluring, it would serve well to get his mind off.

Nonetheless, the offer surprised Chuuya. Dazai didn’t seem him as the type to have many friends and be out a lot, but rather gave off the impression of being a loner. But Chuuya may have misjudged him in this regard.

“A bar you said? Yes, sounds great, I’m in.”

At the way Dazai lit up just too much, Chuuya rolled his eyes, but the subtle smile gave him away.

“Awesome! The bar is Lupin, you’ll find it! We’ll meet at nine.”

“Sure, I’ll be there.”

Chuuya rounded his car to get in, but before he opened the door he looked over the top to see Dazai already leaving.

“Do you need a ride?”

Dazai spun around and walked backwards as he waved. “No, I’m fine! See you later!”

Dazai never needed a ride.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Today's chapter comes a little earlier, but my schedule won't allow me any other time. In celebration of passing my first exam at uni I am giving you the longest chapter of this fic. It has almost 10k as I've gotten a little carried away while writing, but at the same time it's probably one of my favorites. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did while writing.

Also, I have finally found the energy to continue writing the last part of this fic, so I can assure that it will be updated weekly until the end, so those are good news :D

TW: drinking alcohol
vomiting (if you are uncomfortable reading a more or less graphic description, skip the part where they leave the bar for a short time)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘You’ll find it.’

You’ll find it his ass. He did not.

The alley in which the bar was located didn’t show up on Google-maps and Chuuya had to search the entire block as he tried to find it. Although his sense of orientation lacked at times, this time he really had no fault in being late. How should he know that he had to enter the dirtiest and narrowest alley when you couldn’t even see the faint glow of the signboard from further away?

He pushed the heavy door open and was awaited by stairs leading downwards. If he hadn’t heard faint music he would have thought twice about descending into darkness in a shabby building.

The wooden stairs creaked with every step and one of them wobbled as Chuuya set foot on it. That run-down location was supposed to be one of Dazai’s usual places to hang out? Somehow it didn’t fit into the picture of the man who always put so much effort into his appearance. But maybe this was the part inside of him speaking that also wore those silly bandages.

At the end of the stairs was another door, half-closed. It opened easily and Chuuya’s eyes widened as he entered the bar. It didn’t align with his expectations at all. While the exterior needed restoration desperately, no trace of that could be seen inside.

Old, dark wood, of which the bar itself and the sitting booths were made of, catered a rustic impression, the surfaces polished enough for the light to reflect. Photographs and paintings decorated the walls, along with decorative bottles of alcohol and other little details.

Chuuya spotted an ukulele in a corner and a most likely non-functioning coffee-machine. He quickly associated it with the subtle smell of coffee that mixed with the scent of various liquors and something sharper and refreshing.

Relaxing jazz music just loud enough to allow the guests to continue talking at a normal volume sounded through the bar and in every corner of the bar glasses clinked.
The first person Chuuya laid eye on happened to be Dazai who was seated by the bar, laughing at something the guy he was talking to had said. Chuuya immediately recognized it as Dazai’s real laugh. Chuuya couldn’t help it but it conjured up a smile on his own lips. He enjoyed Dazai’s real laugh.

He couldn’t make out the boy’s face as his back was turned to him, but the white hair ringed a bell. He had definitely seen it before.

Dazai spotted him before he could announce his presence and his grin widened as he waved, signaling him to join.

“Hey, there’s Chuuya! Come here!”

Chuuya had intended to do just that and as he walked up to them, the boy turned around.

Atsushi? Against his will, all muscles tensed up.

The boy’s surprise must have mirrored his own but it quickly faded into a welcoming smile that turned into a soft chuckle.

“Hey, Nakahara. Long time no see.” Atsushi gave him his typical salute.

Chuuya hadn’t done anything wrong. Atsushi had no reason to arrest him, they were here on friendly terms. Nevertheless, the initial shock needed a second to wear off. While facing the police had been fun most of the time, tonight he didn’t want to get into any trouble.

When he could return the smile, he took seat next to Dazai, subconsciously putting him as a barrier between him and Atsushi, and leaned over the bar to face the rookie properly.

“Atsushi, nice to see you again. Didn’t expect you here at all.”

He knew Atsushi posed no threat to him. Yet being cautious had never done any harm.

Atsushi frowned at Dazai. “You haven’t told him I would be here?”

Dazai scratched the back of his head, not meeting either Atsushi’s taunting gaze or Chuuya’s betrayed stare.

“I might have forgotten about that. I’m sorry? But we are all here to have a fun night! No need to cause any stress.”

Atsushi and Chuuya groaned in unison at Dazai’s obliviousness, making them both laugh and the remaining tension dropped. Around Atsushi he didn’t have any reason to worry.

The next moment, Chuuya felt the weight of the hat he wore vanishing from his head but he wasn’t quick enough to grab it from Dazai. The hat appeared ridiculously tiny on Dazai’s head, who leaned to the side to examine in the mirror behind the bar. Chuuya tried to snatch it but a bandaged hand slapped his own away.

“Chuuya, why do you possess this thing? Atsushi once told me you wore a hat regularly but this is hilarious!” With one hand Dazai pushed the hat around as if he tried to get it into a position he liked, while the other countered Chuuya’s hopeless attempts in reclaiming it.

A scowl settled on Chuuya’s face.

“Anything else you don’t like about my choice of styling?”
This time, he attempted to distract Dazai with one hand in order to grab his hat with the other but Dazai picked up on his plan too easily, dodging both hands. He then ripped his gaze from the mirror, stopping his self-admiration, and scanned Chuuya from head to toe with judgmental gaze.

“The sole of your right boot is detaching. Also, blue is not your color, you should have chosen red.” Dazai said with earnestness so strong, Chuuya could only blink at Dazai.

“Pardon me?”

He had spent half an hour on deciding what to wear to the bar, until he had settled on a blue chequered flannel and a choker, around which he had built the outfit and when he had checked his look in the mirror, he knew he looked fucking good. Dazai wouldn’t be able to convince him otherwise. But he was right on the part with his shoes, shame on him. He had to replace them soon.

Still, what gave Dazai the right to pick on his style when he himself ran around like a joke – although the lilac dress shirt framed his body just right – with his bandages?

“You hear me. Red would have suited you better. You know blue is my color.” Despite the innocent comment Chuuya’s cheeks heated up when Dazai winked. Trying to hide the most likely obvious blush, he covered his face with his hands as he groaned.

Atsushi watched their bantering in great amusement and hid his chuckle behind a hand but failed to conceal it from Chuuya.

“Atsushi! That’s not fun! I am being terrorized by a hypocrite,” Chuuya whined.

“It is, because it means I am not the one suffering anymore!”

Instantly, Dazai swirled around on the bar stool to face Atsushi. “Don’t you dare thinking you are off the hook so easily. Learn to wear your belt properly first!” The tug he gave Atsushi on the loose end of his black belt sent the officer spinning.

“Ey- Stop that!”

A sly grin was the response he received before Dazai looked at Chuuya again, taking off the hat and putting it on Chuuya’s head, the act gentler than one would expect. He even tucked a strand of red hair away from Chuuya’s face and behind his ear but before Chuuya could push the hand out of his personal space, it was already gone, waving the bartender to come over.

“Chuuya, get yourself something to drink. After all, we agreed on celebrating your successful first week,” Dazai said.

A young man with reddish hair came up to them, an empty glass in his hands which he was drying with a towel. When his gaze fell on Chuuya, he put it down to extend a hand.

“Hey, you are new here, haven’t seen you around before. I’m Junichiro.”

Chuuya accepted the handshake. “Chuuya.”

“Alright. Then, what can I bring you? For you both the usual?” He addressed Dazai and Atsushi, who both nodded.

“Give me whatever red wine you have, I’ll drink almost any.”

Junichiro flicked a finger in acknowledgment, already getting the glasses out of a cupboard, when
Dazai interrupted him.

“Add two vodka shots! Three?” he looked at Atsushi in question, who shook his head. “Two it is.”

“The hell?” Chuuya knitted his eyebrows. He hadn’t asked for vodka, nor did he want any.

“As if I’m going to let you celebrate with wine. That’s boring, Chuuya! We need to get you on a proper level.”

“If only you knew,” Chuuya mumbled, silent enough for nobody else to hear.

As much as he liked alcohol, especially wine, he had never been able to claim he had a high tolerance. This has led so several embarrassing moments in the past which he hated to recall. On bad days, it needed two glasses of wine to get him drunk enough to speak before thinking. If he added vodka or other strong liquor to the game the nights tended to wrap up differently than he planned. As much fun as actually being drunk was, the aftermath usually turned into a mess.

But now the shots were already placed in front of them. Further, Dazai had bought them and you didn’t decline free alcohol. He would manage, somehow.

As a result, he picked the glass up, just as Dazai did, and raised it.

“To your first week and a long-lasting work partnership,” Dazai toasted.

“To us!” Chuuya added before the rims of the glasses clinked together.

Chuuya tilted his head back and drowned the shot in one gulp. To his surprise, his throat wasn’t set on fire; instead a pleasant burn settled which spoke for the liquor’s high quality. Dazai kept a straight face as he downed the liquid. He twirled the empty glass between his fingers, then put it in front of his eye, looking through it and right at Chuuya, all with a mocking smile on his lips.

“See, wasn’t that bad. Now you can have your wine.”

Junichiro took the hint and placed three drinks on the bar – wine for Chuuya, Atsushi reached for the beer and the Whiskey had to be for Dazai.

Chuuya picked up his drink and took a generous sip, deciding it was not the best wine he ever had but definitely belonged to the better ones.

He let his gaze wander through the full, but not overly crowded establishment. Assuming the three people around the dart board belonged to the little group of friends, as they occasionally casted glances into their direction, he watched for anybody else who he would associate with them but everybody else sat farther away, isolated in their own groups.

An outcry made his eyes flicker back to the dart-playing friends.

“How? Not again!” A girl with a high pony tail stomped her foot while crossing her arms in front of her body, clearly upset. The other woman, wearing a white blouse and black skirt laughed out loud but Chuuya couldn’t make out her response; he was sitting too far away. They surely were an interesting group.

“The woman you are watching is Akiko Yosano. Have you seen her before? She’s the pathologist at Portland PD.” Chuuya flinched, unprepared for Dazai’s voice next to him so suddenly.

“The girl she’s talking to is Gin. She works in a construction company as far as I know. She once
was Yosano’s apprentice before changing profession.”

Gin gestured wildly with her hands, a finger repeatedly pointing at Yosano as she ranted about whatever she was upset about. Something about her seemed familiar, though Chuuya couldn’t say what.

“And the guy is Ranpo Edogawa, a private detective. He works in direct relationship with the department. Counting me and Atsushi, that’s our group, missing Kunikida who claims to be busy with the missing people case, following an alleged human trafficker or such.”

Chuuuya found himself relieved that Kunikida wasn’t here. Their relationship was rocky at best and while they parted peacefully the last time, that was an exception. Processing the information Chuuya, noticed a little detail.

“They all work with the police. How do you fit into the picture?”

He took another sip from the wine, and when Dazai’s giggled he scowled. He had asked a simple question, Dazai had no reason to make fun of him for that.

“Is something wrong?” Chuuya asked.

The giggle faded out and Dazai shook his head.

“No, but I think it’s funny how right you are, even you are connected to them. Such a great pattern.”

Dazai reached for the whiskey and downed it. Then he pushed the glass towards the center of the bar and Junichiro grabbed it to refill without further ado. Dazai continued.

“I help with some cases whenever ghosts are involved. They once asked me for help and since then I do just that.”

Then, Atsushi broke into laughter, catching Chuuya’s attention.

“Atsushi, is there something you want to add?”

Still chuckling as he nodded, Atsushi wiped a tear away.

“As dear as you are to me, Dazai, but Kunikida has told me the story how he met you. In his version it ran down a little different.”

Dazai waved him off. “You know Kunikida, he is overdramatic sometimes.”

But Chuuya had gotten curious. Dazai got shoved aside so he could get closer to Atsushi, leaning forward with great interest.

“I’m listening, please continue.”

Atsushi gladly did so.

“Please mind, I can only retell what Kunikida told me.” Atsushi explained, “Kunikida met Dazai three years ago. I don’t know if you remember but back then many cases of arson happened, some ending up with people injured. The police agonized over it for weeks but just couldn’t find anyone responsible, there weren’t even suspects. At one particular torched crime scene, Kunikida spotted Dazai for the first time.”
Dazai whined, “Guys, I really don’t think it’s that interesting, can we just –“

“Ssshhh, shut up, I wanna listen!” A gloved hand covered Dazai’s mouth. “Go ahead Atsushi!”

“Kunikida almost tackled him when he saw him sneaking up to one of his officers. Of course he was banned from the scene immediately. He tried again less than a minute later.”

A tongue licked over the leather of Chuuya’s gloves. He had never felt gladder to wear them.

“Two days later, when a similar crime happened, Dazai was there again, and tried the same thing, again. Kunikida had already threatened to arrest him but Dazai insisted that he needed to get closer to the scene.”

The yelp that escaped Chuuya was more out of surprise than of pain as teeth bit into his palm. A trace of salvia remained on his hand when he pulled back and he wiped it off on Dazai’s shirt in disgust. Hadn’t Dazai spent a thought on how disgustingly dirty the gloves may be? He didn’t wash them daily after all.

“Let me at least defend myself before I come across as a stupid maniac!” Dazai pleaded Atsushi.

“But you are,” Chuuya interfered.

“No, I’m not! Let me finish the story, please, Atsushi.”

“I’ll call you out on any mistakes,” Atsushi said.

“Fine,” that seemed to be a condition Dazai could live with, “The reason I tried to get to the crime scenes was because the responsible ghost always lingered there. He knew I was on his heels, so he hung around at places I couldn’t reach. Government facilities, private households, anywhere, just so he was always out of reach. The only time he would show himself freely was at the crime scenes, where he mocked all the officers for not knowing. He knew damn well I wasn’t allowed there. Didn’t mean I couldn’t try. I had to show at six fires until Kunikida finally asked me what I was up to.”

Chuuya could imagine a younger, intrusive and stubborn Dazai just too well, how he wouldn’t stop trying until reaching his goal. Now he was still intrusive and stubborn, but at least he had learned when to give way.

“What have you told him?”

“The truth.”

“Just like that?” Chuuya had trouble with believing that the Kunikida he knew would instantly listen to such an obscure story.

“Yeah… it didn’t go well at first, but that’s how Kunikida found out about ghosts. But everything turned out fine after that, he briefs all his officers on ghosts now, and if I hadn’t been so persistent we wouldn’t sit here together. So you should thank me!” Dazai’s chest swelled in pride.

Chuuya and Atsushi exchanged glances in a silent conversation before both shook their heads and returned to their drinks. They wouldn’t thank Dazai for anything, especially not when he asked for it. No need to nurture his self-confidence any further.

“I did expect Chuuya to ignore me, but you Atsushi, you break my heart!” Dazai complained. He continued to do just that, and Atsushi listened to his rambling about his unfair life patiently.
Chuuya wouldn’t have endured it a minute.

Heavy steps announced somebody approaching and Chuuya cast a glance at the newcomer. The girl with the ponytail slumped onto the seat next to him with a loud groan and her forehead dropped onto the table. The action reminded him a lot of Kouyou.

“Junichiro, drink please,” she said.

“Another gin for Gin, on its way.”

The joke made Chuuya snort, catching Gin’s attention.

“Are you Chuuya, Dazai’s new partner?”

“Yes, you must be Gin.”

She nodded in response and as soon as she was handed her drink, she didn’t hesitate to down it at once, just as Dazai had done with his whiskey.

“One day, I’ll beat her,” she muttered into her now empty glass.

“Sorry, beat who?” He hadn’t been sure if he understood correctly. Did she want to beat someone up literally or just hypothetically? Because it generally didn’t make a good first impression when you menaced violence.

“Yosano. I always play down way faster than her but she beats me at the play out every fucking time.”

Oh, so she was talking about darts. He should have guessed, judging by her outburst before.

“I don’t think I can help you with that. But focusing on the area where you are the most comfortable throwing could help, if it’s anything like throwing knives.”

Gin propped up her elbow and rested her face on her hand, her cheeks flushed red, having most likely had more than one drink that night.

“No it’s not, because if it was, I would be the only winner.”

“You know how to throw knives?” Chuuya asked, genuine surprise in his tone.

“Yes, and I rule at it. Care to see?” A spark lit up in her eyes and she didn’t wait for him to replied but leaned over the bar to grab the first knife she could reach. Chuuya’s heart rate picked up at the sight, a knot forming in his chest. She was obviously tipsy at best. Seeing her handling the sharp object made him feel more than uneasy.

“Maybe you shouldn’t –,” but Gin had already scattered over to the side to have a good view on her aim. The tip of her tongue stuck out as she concentrated and less than a second later she hurled the knife at Atsushi.

Chuuya gasped for air. He already mentally prepared himself to apply first aid on the rookie.

The knife passed Atsushi less than half an inch away from his ear and dug into the wall behind him. The boy flinched when he realized what had happened.

Then he whined, “Gin, how many times must I repeat, don’t do that or I’ll die from a heart attack!”
Repeat? That hadn’t happened for the first time? A proud grin spread on Gin’s face as she looked at Chuuya again.

“See? I said I rule.”

Chuuya chugged the rest of his wine. He needed something to slow his heart rate down. While her skills appeared to be impressive if she could aim perfectly while being drunk, it had been enough to give him a good scare.

Gin’s attention turned to Atsushi, who attempted to take up the conversation with Dazai but got interrupted by the girl.

“Atsushi, when is your boyfriend due to come?”

“Soon, I guess? He hasn’t settled on a specific time.”

Dazai chimed in, overly excited. “You invited your boyfriend? Why didn’t you say anything? I’ve been dying to meet him!”

“Didn’t get the chance to.” Atsushi simply shrugged, letting the subject drop and Gin began questioning Chuuya on his own knife-throwing skills, even wanted him to demonstrate but his common sense still functioned well enough to refuse to do so.

The evening turned more and more interesting. Chuuya hadn’t expected to enjoy his time with strangers as much as he did, but the longer he sat there, the more comfortable he felt. Not once did he feel left out as he was constantly engaged in conversations.

Gin bombarded him with questions about his interests and after some minutes the woman named Yosano introduced herself and joined Gin’s questioning. They wanted to know everything about him, what he did, and how he had come to work with Dazai. He almost never got to finish speaking. Apparently, the shithead hadn’t told them any more than the fact that he had a partner now.

One didn’t need to be a mastermind to realize that Yosano was an ambitious woman with her own will. She practically radiated strength and intelligence, yet Chuuya got entertained by her morbid humor; the kind only a doctor had. He found out that she had worked in a hospital for several years before joining the police department and that she owned a cat.

After a while Ranpo, who had been talking to another guy up to now, joined them and the group relocated to a lager table where they could all sit in a circle.

Ranpo merely introduced with his name as he stared down Chuuya as if he tried to gain as much information about him as possible just by taking in his image. Chuuya didn’t question it. Over the next few minutes Ranpo turned out to be a unique character with a love for pointing out facts people tried to hide.

Chuuya felt sorry for poor Atsushi when Ranpo mentioned the hickey on his neck which the boy had tried to hide with make-up and a high collar. Nobody would have noticed if Ranpo hadn’t brought attention to it, encouraging the others to question him about his love life. Atsushi only shifted uncomfortably in his seat and stuttered, ears burning red as he avoided answering.

One drink after another was consumed and by the time they were on their fourth round, the alcohol got to Chuuya’s head. He knew he laughed too much and too loudly, the lights had turned blurry a while ago and sometimes he struggled with clear speech, causing some laughs. But he didn’t care, he felt great.
Additionally, the others weren’t in a much better state.

Atsushi stuttered at every question given, Ranpo struggled with keeping his eyes open and Yosano had gotten a little touchy with everyone within reach. The only one remotely sober happened to be Dazai.

Although he hadn’t had any less to drink than the rest of them, the alcohol didn’t have any more impact than him being more relaxed and a bit gigglier, listening to the shared anecdotes.

Apart from that, he also grew quieter with every drink he had, taking on the role of a silent listener and observer. From time to time it almost seemed as if he wasn’t present anymore, his gaze distant and his mind far away. It bothered Chuuya more than it should have.

He tried to draw a reaction from him with poking a finger into Dazai’s cheek, only to have his hand slapped away; but without any force.

Dazai smiled. He had a pretty smile. “What are you trying to do? You know this doesn’t work on me.”

Chuuya pouted. “You are so quiet, that’s so not you.”

“You are so witty, that’s so not you,” Dazai countered.

As a response, Chuuya gave him a smack with his hat, light enough to only pat his hair, but Dazai still cried out in distaste. “Ow, Chuuya is being mean!”

“I’m not mean, you are being a prick!”

“I’m not, but I can be!”

Slender fingers dug into his ribcage and if he hadn’t been so drunk Chuuya would have been embarrassed about crying out, but he was too occupied with wiggling out of Dazai’s ruthless attack to care about that. In his attempt he might have accidentally smacked Gin with an elbow, he wasn’t sure. Within seconds Dazai had him begging for mercy.

Neither of them noticed the musing glances and silent giggles being shared around the table.

Luckily for Chuuya, the entrance door opened and Dazai let him be as all heads turned to look at the newcomer. While it could be any guest, the group highly anticipated the arrival of Atsushi’s boyfriend.

Chuuya recognized the black coat before he made out the person’s face.

“Akutagawa?”
Akutagawa stopped in his tracks, locking eyes with him. “You are here too?”

“Duh.” Chuuya was about to ask what he was doing here as he had mentioned being occupied tonight, when his eyes flickered to Atsushi who literally beamed with joy, waving Akutagawa closer.

Oh. Now he got it.

Wait. What?

Looking back at Akutagawa, he had turned his attention to the rookie and a soft smile played on his lips. Akutagawa rarely smiled.
Still in disbelief, Chuuya watched Atsushi scatting closer to Dazai to make space for Akutagawa, who slid next to him before gently tilting Atsushi’s head up with a finger to give him a dolce kiss. Somebody made a sound of awe.

Chuuya struggled to avert his gaze. Somehow he doubted that the person sitting there was his Akutagawa. While rarely being rude, the Akutagawa he knew didn’t show affection, ever and instead even struggled with the most basic friendly gestures, usually sticking to his default neutral attitude. But there he sat, displaying a relationship in front of multiple people he didn’t know.

Fingers flicked in front of Chuuya’s face, making him tear his eyes away to look at Dazai instead.

“Don’t stare, it’s rude.”

Atsushi took over, “Guys, this is Ryuunsouke, my boyfriend” and Akutagawa offered a wave. Everybody quickly introduced themselves, only Chuuya and Gin remained silent.

Suddenly the girl yelped and shoved Yosano. “What was the kick for?” she asked.

“Introduce yourself, be polite.”

“I don’t have to introduce to my brother.”

“Your brother?” Yosano seemed equally as surprised as Chuuya, before rethinking. He knew she seemed familiar. In hindsight he should have figured it out. Akutagawa had mentioned his sister before but his brain had failed to connect the name to the girl. He blamed it on the alcohol.

“Yes, my brother. I wish, he wasn’t. Ow! What’s up with you all kicking me?”

“You are unbearable when drunk.” Akutagawa simply deadpanned.

Meanwhile, Chuuya had returned to staring at the couple, not fully comprehending the situation. Akutagawa and he met on a regular basis for over two years now. How did he not know? How did the emo-boy not care to tell him? He would be lying if he said he wasn’t slightly hurt. Friends were supposed to tell each other things like that, weren’t they? Chuuya would always have a whinge on his miserable hook-ups.

As it was his turn to introduce, everyone watched him expectantly.

“I don’t get it,” Chuuya finally said.

“Get what?” Yosano asked.

Chuuya kept his eyes on Akutagawa who stared back at him without a blink and he ignored Yosano in favor of addressing Akutagawa.

“How could you, my best man, keep such an important detail about your private life from me? You pain me, just so you know,” Chuuya sulked.

Akutagawa just shrugged. “You never asked?”

“I shouldn’t have to!” His lower lip pushed forward in a sad expression. He hadn’t done that in a long time, ever since he got told it looked childish, but who cared. Right now, he wanted to be childish.

Unsure on whom to look at, Dazai just asked into the group. “How do you happen to know each other?”
“Akutagawa takes, or rather took care of some business of mine when needed,” Chuuya didn’t take his eyes off Akutagawa, still sulking.

Akutagawa snorted without humor. “Be honest. I handled one of his credit cards, just to pay his bail or to bribe his victims into withdrawing their charge every time he got into trouble he couldn’t manage to get out by himself – which marks almost every single time. At least he paid well.”

“Firstly, that’s not true! I did my job pretty well. Secondly, don’t make it sound as if I forced you to do it,” Chuuya complained, “You want to imply that our friendship was only based on finances? And there I thought we made a good team.” He put his hand on his chest, right over his heart, in theatric manners.

“No, of course not but-“

“Then you have no reason to put such shame on me.” Chuuya said accusingly and Akutagawa finally gave way.

“All right, I’m sorry.”

“You better be. And be sure, I’ll haunt you if you ever decide to keep such important matters from me!”

Ranpo, who had taken in the scene with great curiosity, asked Atsushi “Am I right to assume that that’s how the two of you met?” and Atsushi nodded.

“As Chuuya spent a lot of time at the department, we meeting at some point was inevitable. But it was only some weeks ago that Ryuu asked me out and well, there we are.”

“My brother asked you out?” Gin sounded as if she didn’t believe him.

“I have feelings too, toad,” Akutagawa scolded. Gin stuck her tongue out.

The night took one turn after another and Chuuya struggled to comprehend everything. He enjoyed the company of everybody; their amiable attitude towards him warmed his heart.

But after getting to know so many new people, the latest discovery pushed his mind over the edge and had his thoughts racing. Everything that had happened today, from the case to the discovery of his ability to the introduction of those people and the discovery of Akutagawa being Atsushi’s boyfriend, played over in his head in a rapid speed.

He had tried to push today afternoon’s matters aside since he had come home, not wanting to put up with it. Now it overwhelmed him. Everything overwhelmed him. How had his life become such a mess? He needed to get distracted, something to ease the dull headache that began to settle in the back of his head.

A hand appeared on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. Dazai had moved closer to him ever so slightly until their legs barely touched. His voice was low enough to stay unheard by the others who were already engaged in a new topic and discussing it aggressively but Chuuya couldn’t make out any specific words. It all sounded like static.

“Are you okay? You seem unwell.”

Chuuya blinked his eyes open. He hadn’t even noticed he had closed them.

“I’m alright.”
Looking around the table he took in the empty glasses. Maybe it was time for the next round. Alcohol would definitely calm his mind down. Yes, that sounded like a brilliant idea.

“Guys, the next round’s on me,” he announced, “Treat yourself.”

Cheers rose around the table but a faint whisper next to his ear drowned them out.

“Follow me.” Something tugged at his t-shirt. He wished he knew what made him listen to the instruction, but without further thought he got up and pulled out his credit card, placing it in front of Akutagawa.

“You know how to use it, I’ll be right back.”

Dazai already waited for him at the door and Chuuya let himself be led outdoors where the cold air of the night hit him like a slap into his face. He took several deep breaths and with each one the surroundings spun a little more. Perhaps he had a little too much alcohol. He felt dizzy. The edges around his vision turned more and more blurry and with a groan he leaned against the nearest wall, closing his eyes, trying to get his shit together. Dazai mimicked his action; Chuuya heard the silent thud next to him.

How did he think more alcohol would be a solution? Suddenly, he was glad to not participate in the next round.

He heard a click and the faint scent of nicotine urged him to reopen his eyes. With his head leaned against the brick wall, Dazai took a drag on a cigarette before breathing out a cloud of smoke. His hair had lost every trace of styling as the night had moved on and now messily framed his face, being long enough to hide one of his eyes. In the sparsely illuminated alley the dark brown appeared almost black.

“Did you just drag me out to have company while having a smoke?” Chuuya asked, the words heavy on his tongue.

Dazai flicked off the excess the cigarette.

“No. You looked a little out of yourself. I figured some fresh air would do you good. I am merely using the opportunity.”

“You know smoking is bad for you?” Chuuya immediately realized how stupid he sounded. Of course Dazai knew. Everybody knew that. That must be the alcohol speaking for him.

Dazai took another drag before answering with a chuckle.

“I know. I have tried stopping and I am not doing so bad, but sometimes it’s too easy to fall back into old habits. But I don’t have to tell you, right?”

Chuuya eyed him from the side. At some point tonight one more of the buttons on Dazai’s shit had been opened. Despite being drunk, the hint of accusation didn’t go unnoticed. “Specify.”

“You were struggling with something. Drowning it in more alcohol is not the best thing to do.”

“I’m not an alcoholic if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Never said that.”

Silence fell between them, the only sound coming from Dazai puffing the smoke out.
Chuuya didn’t remember the last time he had gotten so shit-faced. Wine didn’t go well with various shots. Usually he refrained from strong drinks, their burn making him uncomfortable but tonight happened to be just right for them as he had let himself going along with the others.

The lightheadedness appeared along with a pressuring feeling in his throat and Chuuya barely managed to hurry to the next trash can before his stomach contracted. As he leaned over the bin, he heaved violently, emptying the contents of his stomach. His entire body fought but the urge was too persistent.

Only vaguely he took note of the cold hands which grasped strands of his hair and held them back into a ponytail. Another hand patted his back in a soothing rhythm.

After several more heaves Chuuya had nothing more to get rid of. With the next heave his guts would be vomited.

His arms kept his body up, his legs shaking too much to hold his entire weight. The deep breaths did little to stave off how out of body he felt or how disgusting his mouth tasted.

When Dazai was convinced that Chuuya’s stomach wouldn’t turn again, he let go of his hair and helped him to the next wall where Chuuya slithered down to the ground.

Kneeling down next to him, Dazai handed him a bottle of water which Chuuya took gratefully. He chugged down half of the bottle at once.

“How did you know?”

“Your glazed eyes gave it away.”

Chuuya nodded in response. Having the alcohol out of his system relieved him. While he felt spent, the dizziness eased up and with passing time his stomach calmed down.

Exhausted, his head dropped onto his drawn-up knees.

“This is so embarrassing,” Chuuya muttered. The last time he had vomited from alcohol-abuse had been four years ago, on his eighteenth birthday; a day he preferred not to remember.

He had almost forgotten how awful he had felt that night, but the pain he experienced now happened to be painfully similar. However, that night he had been all by himself, alone in his basement. Now, he had Dazai at his side, an almost stranger but not so anymore, who mustered him with worried eyes. He didn’t know if being alone wouldn’t have been better.

“It’s fine, it happens to the best of us,” Dazai offered an uplifting smile, “but you are surely a lightweight.”

If Chuuya hadn’t been as drained as he was he would have punched Dazai into that handsome face of his. Yes, Dazai might be right, but he didn’t need to be reminded of that. Instead, he retorted with a groan, “Don’t mess with me now, Dazai, I’m miserable.”

“I know. Take your time.” Dazai’s voice lost every trace of mockery, solicitude replacing it. Chuuya might have thought about it further hadn’t his body and mind struggled with getting up onto his feet again.

Dazai didn’t help him as he pushed up again after a while, feeling recovered enough to face the
others. Walking would get his circulation going. But Dazai did push a little, wrapped object into his palm – chewing gum.

“Thank you”, Chuuya said, “for everything.” Maybe he had come to the conclusion that suffering wasn’t half as bad in company. Maybe he appreciated the way Dazai had held his hair. Maybe he was talking about taking him to the bar tonight. Maybe he thanked Dazai for all of these. He didn’t know. He only knew he was fucking glad to have Dazai by his side right now. Being alone would have sucked.

Dazai gave Chuuya precedence when walking back into the bar. Some glances were cast into their direction when they entered together but quickly dropped to listen to a story Yosano was telling.

They slid into their seats without any comment. The glasses around the table have been refilled by now and his credit card lay next to his empty one. Akutagawa must have known about his state. After all, they did know each other well.

“Oh my gosh, look who’s back! How cute you are, come here!” Dazai’s voice pitched two octaves higher, catching Chuuya off guard and he quickly turned to face him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Chuuya had never heard him making that sound before. Staring at the place next to him, eyes shining with joy, Dazai continued to coo thin air. Chuuya’s brows knitted in confusion and the people around him did just the same.

“Aren’t you a sweet boy? Where have you been?” Dazai ignored him.

Chuuya locked eyes with Yosano and Gin, who seemed just as clueless. What had gotten into Dazai’s mind? Maybe it’s the alcohol finally hitting, but just minutes ago he had been clear as always and while Dazai had a tendency to act oddly at times, this was an entire new level.

Chuuya waved a hand in front of Dazai’s face. “Hey, are you hallucinating?”

Dazai merely blinked at him. Then a surprised expression washed over his face just to be followed by a wide grin.

“You can’t see him, right?”

Chuuya had heard almost the exact same question a week ago and still didn’t get it. “See who?”

Dazai again ignored him in favor of leaning over the table to have a better look at Akutagawa.

“You can see him, right? Where did you find him?”

Akutagawa had turned pale. It made him wonder what essential part he missed to get whatever they were talking about, but telling seemed too difficult for the both of them.

Atsushi, sitting right between them, cleared his throat to get their attention but got ignored as well. They were too engaged in having a silent conversation, staring each other down until Akutagawa broke. “Please don’t take him from me.”

What the fuck.

“I would never. I’m just curious.”

What the actual fuck.

That nobody else knew what went on between them alleviated his confusion a little, but not enough
to not wonder further. It needed Gin’s shrill exclamation of Akutagawa’s first name to pull them out of their own world again.

“Ryuunosuke, spit it!” she demanded.

He sighed. “Rashoumon.”

Chuuya tried to figure out which language he spoke but stopped mid-thought as dark fog emerged out of nothing. It circled on the floor next to Akutagawa, spinning with increasing speed and when Chuuya had thought the week couldn’t turn any weirder, a four-legged figure stood next to his chair.

Chuuya didn’t believe his eyes. While the creature resembled a dog in some way, it clearly didn’t belong into this world. Shadows danced around it, its features sharp, and no fur coated it but instead a matte, indefinable, almost liquidy substance. But the most outstanding were the huge, red glowing eyes, which stared directly at Dazai.

Atsushi flinched and moved the chair back some inches to gain distance. To his luck, Chuuya had Dazai between him and the beast. Everybody else leaned over the table as far as they could to get a better look. It was fascinating. Chuuya didn’t dare taking his eyes off it, fearing it would disappear again.

“What is this?” Gin asked, intrigued.

“A demon, you moron,” Ranpo stated dryly.

“How would you know?” Gin queried his statement.

“Just look at it. Or do you really think it’s a dog?” Ranpo retorted.

Chuuya listened to their conversation. If Ranpo assumed it to be a demon there must be something to it. He failed to doubt Ranpo’s observation skills after the demonstrations he had delivered earlier.

“So you are telling me demons are actually a thing?” Chuuya asked.

“Of course they are. You work with Dazai, shouldn’t you know?” Ranpo talked as if Chuuya was stupid to not be aware of such things, even though he had previously mentioned that this world had just opened up to him.

Chuuya prepared to snap at Ranpo to stop declaring him dumb when a chuckle drew his attention. Dazai had extended a hand to pet that thing.

“I’ve been looking for you little guy. Glad to see you safe.”

“Would you be so nice to enlighten us?” Yosano was the first to lose her patience.

“Of course,” Dazai had come to his senses and noticed that leaving them in the dark probably wasn’t the best idea, “You are right, Rashoumon is a demonic animal. However, he is the most peaceful creature I have met, he wouldn’t harm a fly. He has chosen to stay hidden from eye-sight; therefore you couldn’t see him. But he has always shown himself to me, demons love me.” Dazai offered a wink.

Chuuya once again felt as if lacked crucial information; however, nobody else picked up on the joke, so Dazai continued, “I used to look after him for a while, but one day he vanished and I was
unable to locate him. But turns out he found his place. I wonder, why you?” Dazai addressed Akutagawa, “You aren’t even sighted, right?”

Akutagawa shook his head. “I’m not, but I found him one day underneath a bridge, all beaten up. At first I thought he would kill me, but he approached me in search for help. I took him in, nursed him. Now he refuses to leave and follows me everywhere. I got used to his company.”

“You- you want to tell me this… thing has been around every time we met?” Atsushi’s voice trembled, visibly scared of the demon creature.

Akutagawa reached for his hand, stroking it soothingly. “He wouldn’t cause any harm. Usually he doesn’t even show around people.”

Dazai put his hand onto his chin as he pondered. “Demons can decide who is able to see them. If he hides so much, I can’t quite grasp how he got injured - unless they can see him at all times, just like me.” Dazai wasn’t talking to anyone in particular anymore, having got lost in his own considerations.

But Chuuya had no interest in trying to keep up with Dazai, much more interested in the creature itself. He wondered what its skin would feel like. Would it be soft or rough? The hand reached around Dazai’s chair for the demon without hesitation. He had stretched his hand far enough to pet it when the creature shrieked and spun around with jaws wide open, revealing sharp fangs and trying to snatch for Chuuya’s hand.

The table covered in a red glow.

Through his gloves, red light of his ability illuminated the area. At the same time, Rashoumon was frozen in place, inches away from Chuuya’s hand, who panted in shock. While he hadn’t activated his ability on purpose, he counted himself lucky to have found out about it today, or else a pair of fangs would pierce his palm now.

Silence fell around the table. Not even a breath was to be heard. Chuuya feared they would hear his heart pounding against his chest. Nobody knew where to look – both the demonic creature and Chuuya’s ability fascinating.

Akutagawa regained composure first. “Rashoumon, here!” he ordered.

Simultaneously Chuuya let his hand drop, at which his ability cleared out. It allowed Rashoumon to move again, making the creature whimper, almost like a puppy and it rushed to sit under Akutagawa’s chair, curling around his feet.

“You scared him,” Dazai said accusingly.

Chuuya sat up straight in his chair. “It tried to bite me!” he snarled.

“Because you scared him!” Dazai tried again.

Atsushi eyes wide in shock, he asked, “Didn’t you say it was harmless?” at which Dazai merely shrugged.

“He is, but he will still defend himself.”

“What kind of ability is this?” Yosano asked Chuuya who hadn’t expected anyone to take interest in him as long as Rashoumon was around. Her eyes were solely on him and suddenly, everyone watched him.
“I don’t know”, he answered truthfully.

“How can you not know, it’s your ability after all?”

“He obviously doesn’t know a thing yet.” Ranpo took a sip from his liqueur. “Show it again. Don’t ask, do it.”

Chuuya took in the situation around the table. Expectant eyes were on him, while Rashoumon had settled on the floor, relaxed as no attention was paid to him.

It didn’t make sense why Ranpo would ask such thing from him. To him, a demon creature seemed much more intriguing than his ability but for some reason Ranpo thought differently. Chuuya complied.

Although his mind wasn’t as clouded as before, it took him a second to picture the same ball of energy he had in the afternoon but in no time, red surrounded his hands again. In comparison to the glow earlier that day, it didn’t shine as bright as it had before. Rather it appeared dull and weak.

Out of impulse he removed one glove. As a result the ability lit up anew with much more energy to it and the glow almost blinded Chuuya. He hadn’t realized he used so much force to evoke it and chose to retract some of the energy to make it easier on the eye and not blind anyone around him.

Next to him, Dazai muttered, “So it’s not the gloves.”

“Not entirely, but they do restrain the energy.” Chuuya said.

A thud signaled that something had been put on the table and Chuuya laid eyes on a scalpel. Immediately he pulled back his hand, wary now. “What are you going to do with that?”

Yosano picked it up and twisted it in her fingers with a playful smile on her lips. “Don’t worry, it’s not here to hurt you. Ranpo wants to test a theory and that’s the only object with extra-mundane energy we have at hand. Except for Rashoumon, but I doubt Akutagawa will offer him for experiments.”

“Not even in my dreams”, Akutagawa confirmed.

“Why do you even carry such a thing with you?” Chuuya asked Yosano.

Why were all these people so extraordinary? One randomly threw knives, the other had a demon pet and Yosano carried chirurgic utensils with her. And there he had hoped for a relaxed night out but luck wasn’t on his side. Seemingly, fate had decided to reveal the world’s true nature to him after years of hiding.

“I’m a doctor, as I said. And my ability allows me to heal injuries inquired by extra-mundane energy. But that’s not the point now. Activate your power.” Giving up questioning and accepting that this how things were going now, Chuuya did.

Ranpo pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Now, Yosano will move the scalpel in your direction. Can you try to stop it?”

Chuuya nodded. Actually, he had no idea how to do that, but he would try nonetheless because the more he found out about his ability the better. Although he had tried his best to distract himself from any of that, the new discovery remained a stable companion in the back of his mind.

Subsequently, when Yosano moved the scalpel towards his hand, he pushed another bundle of
energy down his arms and this time he needn’t to focus as much as he had to before. Without the gloves it was easier and it felt more natural. Nothing held the power back anymore.

Around him, nobody dared to move.

Yosano’s hand stopped mid-air, the muscles in her arm tensing up as she unsuccessfully tried to force the scalpel past the wall Chuuya’s ability had formed. The more she pushed, the brighter the red got but Chuuya didn’t feel a thing, the energy merely tingling in his hand. If he hadn’t seen her struggling, he wouldn’t have known about her attempt.

His eyes widened in shock when Yosano struck out and launched the scalpel at his hand at full strength. Before he could comprehend the situation, the red lit up and Yosano was sent flying back into her seat.

“What the hell,” Gin whispered by his side as Yosano groaned in pain.

“Holy, Yosano, I am so sorry!” Chuuya hadn’t intended to push her away, much less to hurt her and he felt incredibly sorry. Yosano cracked her neck as she waved him off.

“It’s fine. I should have been more cautious and not assume you had full control over it. After all an abilities first instinct is to protect the vessel.”

That was new. Dazai hadn’t told him that but it made sense.

“Interesting,” Ranpo said, squinting at him and obviously brooding over something, “Can you move the scalpel?”

“With what, telekinesis?” Chuuya rolled his eyes. There was no need to get absurd now.

“No, with your ability,”

“Try it, he might be right”, Dazai said.

A sigh escaped him, but again, he complied. What else should he do?

Concentrating on the scalpel on the table, he tried to reach out for it with the energy he felt in his hands. He formed a picture of tendons which grabbed it and lifted it, and without any effort, the object, enveloped in red, raised into the air to Chuuya’s surprise. That had been easy. He didn’t even really try.

Ranpo’s eyes followed the action. “For The Tainted Sorrow.” Ranpo said, “That’s your ability. It’s called ‘For The Tainted Sorrow’. I have read about it, but never actually seen it. It is said to have been sighted last over a century ago.”

Chuuya didn’t know what to say. It’s not as if that title spoke to him. The scalpel still floated in mid of the table, just high enough to stay hidden from the sight of the few other guests. Until now, nobody had picked up on the conversations they had and Chuuya preferred it to stay this way.

“How exciting!” Dazai mused, “I really have made quite the exceptional catch!”

In a red flash, the scalpel shot across the table to sit few inches away from Dazai’s bandaged neck, tip facing the skin.

“I am not a trophy of yours.” Chuuya growled lowly. Dazai had a talent for making inappropriate jokes in inconvenient times and Chuuya made a mental note to teach Dazai on that someday.
Dazai’s eyes flickered down to the knife without a comment before he squinted questioningly.

Atsushi, who had watched everything play out in front of him, raised his voice, “Chuuya, that looks dangerous.”

At once the scalpel dropped onto the table. Right. He didn’t have enough control over the ability yet to pull off some stunts. And there was still alcohol in his system, even if it didn’t feel like it anymore.

So far the ability had acted pretty much on its own with little influence from Chuuya and he didn’t doubt a second that if his focus wavered the scalpel might slip. He had to learn how to be more careful with it.

“Well, and what exactly does it do?” Dazai asked.

“It allows him to control extra-mundane energy. You can compare it to gravity-control, just for e.m.e.” Ranpo clarified.

Chuuya didn’t want to hear it. His mind once again was on the verge of drifting off into a state of overstimulation which was the last thing he wanted. Today has already cost him more nerves than he knew he had. If he began cogitating on his ability’s potential now, he feared he would burst out in tears from exhaustion, the familiar pressure already behind his eyes.

Gin picked up on his distress. “Anyone care for another drink? I could use one now.”

Chuuya shouldn’t drink any more as he had had enough for one day but in this moment, he craved for some distraction the burn of liquor would provide. His mind paced back and forth indecisively.

“We could use some now. Let’s don’t talk about these things anymore, no need to ruin the mood. This round’s on me.” Dazai made the decision for him. He would definitely drink another one.

“And there you try to tell me I keep secrets from you,” Akutagawa said to Chuuya.

“It’s not a secret if I don’t know it myself!” Chuuya intended to defend himself but Dazai’s hands quickly covered both his and Akutagawa’s mouths.

“I said no more talking about it. Now, order a drink.”

* * *

Dazai and Gin were the last to leave the bar. The sun had not yet risen above the horizon but its light already peeked from behind the buildings and birds chirped their morning melody, while the city remained deserted as the rush wouldn’t begin for another half an hour. Dazai took in the fresh morning air. He loved the smell of frost and the typical coldness of the wind that tousled his hair in the early hours; it was just too sweet.

They walked through alley silently, sharing the first passage of their ways home. The others had left a few hours prior, Atsushi and Akutagawa being the first to disappear and Chuuya following not long after. Yosano and Ranpo had said their good-byes about an hour ago and Dazai and Gin
had remained to finish their last drinks without hassles.

Despite drinking until recently, the effect of the alcohol had begun to wear off. The clouds in Dazai’s mind slowly moved away and while every single noise that reached his ear was still too loud, he didn’t mind. It’s nothing he hadn’t dealt with before.

Gin’s sassy attitude also vanished as her usual quiet and coy personality reappeared. He had always been a firm believer that parts of one’s true nature only revealed under external influence, to which he counted alcohol, but to Dazai it would remain forever entralling how much people changed when drinking. Therefore, he wondered where her quietness originated from. He had yet to find out.

“Hey, Dazai, can I ask you something?” Her voice only half as loud as in the bar, she held her gaze low, hands curling around her purse.

Dazai hummed in acknowledgment.

“I wanted to ask the entire night but with all going on I didn’t get to it. Is it possible for ghosts to be bound to another person?”

Dazai blinked. “What exactly do you mean?”

“There’s this one manager at my company and whenever he walks by I get this unsettling feeling. You know, the one I get when there’s a ghost around. It’s exactly the same. But he is still alive.”

How interesting. He continued walking, his mind going through multiple solutions, considering every option carefully before answering.

“It’s rather unusual. But there are ghosts which tend to be emotionally attached to humans. It is possible that there is a ghost following your coworker wherever he goes. Has his behavior changed lately?”

Gin shook her head. “I don’t have a lot to do with him, but as far as I have noticed, it hasn’t.”

Dazai’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly as some tension that had built up vanished. There had been another option on his mind. If her answer had been yes, he would have had reason to be seriously concerned, for her wellbeing as well as the one of this city.

There were creatures out there, darker than anything a normal human could comprehend - Rashoumon being the perfect example; although a rather benign one. The last thing he wished for was for darkness to shadow the city. He had heard rumors, but after all, they were just that.

If Gin was correct, he had no reason for concern.

“Then you should be fine,” he said, “but as soon as something changes, tell me. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Her eyes widened in shock and he instantly wished he hadn’t said that. He didn’t intend to frighten the girl.

“No need to worry, it won’t be anything serious, but just in case.” It didn’t calm her down a lot, but enough to sigh in relief.

“Alright, thanks. I’ll have to go, I’ll see you around.” She waved at him as she turned left at the next crossroad, leaving Dazai alone.
He really hoped he wasn’t mistaken.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
I also think it’s time to overcome the anxiety, so I will try my best to reply to any of your comments, just so you know :)
Hey everybody, I hope you are all doing fine!
Here’s chapter 7 for you, things are going down from here on, so be prepared.
Thank you for the great responses to the last chapter, every form of feedback is greatly appreciated <3

TW: blood
graphic description of wounds

Dazai had expected a vicious accident scene, but he had not anticipated its actual atrocity. Even from afar he could make out the blood splatters on the inside of the shattered windshield and the hand prints that covered the side windows. A long time had passed since he had last seen so much gore and he had yet to cast a look inside the car. The wind carried the smell of burnt tires.

Next to him, Chuuya fiddled with the hem of his gloves – he always did when he was nervous – but other than that he appeared to be alright, rather than disturbed. Until now the color hadn’t drained from his face and Dazai hoped it would remain that way because the last thing he wanted was him to puke again. But for now, he couldn’t be sure as the hangover Chuuya obviously had might still hit in.

Dazai knew he had called Chuuya out of bed at unholy hours, considering how late he must have gotten to sleep, but work didn’t have regard for them, especially not if the assignment came from the police.

Even though Chuuya tried to suppress the yawns, he couldn’t hide the dark circles under his eyes or the rosiness of his cheeks from being too tired. Dazai watched with amusement as Chuuya hugged himself tightly, trying to escape the coldness of the morning. He really must realize that summer had ended and that those sunny, warm days were over, but Dazai decided against telling him to exchange his leather jacket for a warmer one. Chuuya was old enough.

Instead, Dazai stuffed his hands into the fleecy pockets of his coat as he approached the accident and pushed past the mass of gawkers, who tried to gain understanding of the current situation.

A woman even cried.

The barrier was guarded by Atsushi who struggled with keeping the citizens at a safe distance. If people just realized how much of a hindrance for their work they were.

“How does it come that you are doing so well?” The grumble clearly wasn’t meant to be heard by Dazai, but he did anyway and failed to hold back a grin.

“It’s not my fault that Chuuya is such a lightweight. I have good genes, just so you know. It takes me a lot more to get a hangover.”

He refused to count the faint pounding in the back of his head as a symptom of a hangover but
attributed it to the lack of sleep on which he functioned currently. Although he didn’t feel tired in particular, common sense told him that twenty minutes of rest weren’t enough to recover. He would find time for sleeping later.

As soon as Atsushi caught sight of them, relief lit up in his face and he lifted the barrier tape up for them to slip through underneath. Dazai noticed that while Atsushi had equally dark circles under his eyes, he radiated much more energy than Chuuya. It required no hard thinking to come up with a possible reason, because the blush that appeared on Atsushi’s nose as Dazai offered a knowing smile said it all, making Dazai chuckle. But as much as he enjoyed the teasing, he had come for another reason.

“I apologize for the chaos,” Atsushi said, “but this is the fifth car crash this month, people are becoming suspicious. Kunikida is back at the car, he will tell you the details.”

Somebody tried to sneak into the shut off area and Atsushi barely managed to apologize before rushing off to rebuke them.

Dazai had always had the impression that the officers stared at him every time he entered a crime scene but with Chuuya trailing behind him he got proven wrong. Every police man they walked by lifted their head to take a closer look at who had just entered their territory. They had always been wary around Dazai, never really warming up to him, but the stares Chuuya received were sharp as knives. Somebody really must have messed with them.

To be fair, the distrust didn’t bother Dazai, unlike years ago when he had tried to get on their good side at every cost, and he ignored them skillfully. Casting a glance back he noticed Chuuya doing just the same but with his chin raised high and gaze focused on the way, a superior grin playing on his lips.

Dazai shook his head in amusement. Sometimes he wished he would find pride in these little things as well.

Kunikida kept distance to the car that had crashed into a tree off the road while talking to one of his officers and taking notes in his notebook hectically. He only looked up when Dazai already stood in front of him.

“You showed up quicker than I thought,” Kunikida noted, voice dry.

“Only because this time you have caught my interest. What have you got for me?”

The officer had rung him just when he finally had been drifting off into slumber. He hadn’t even attempted explaining the situation to Dazai but rather commanded him to show up. Of course Dazai had no obligations towards him; after all, they asked for *his* help; but he knew sleeping would be no option anymore. Further, hearing Kunikida in such distress happened rarely, which meant something truly awful must have happened. Curiosity had gotten the better of him.

Dazai’s fingers tingled from the cold, his nails already turning blue, and he feared they would freeze off, as not even the coat’s pockets managed to warm them up. Dazai crossed his arms in front of his chest, tugging his hands close to his body. Apart from them, his body was comfortably warm.

The feeling suddenly familiar, a presumption popped into his mind, but he pushed it aside. First, he would observe the scene. Jumping into false conclusion wouldn’t help him.

Chuuya stopped next to him, mimicking his action but in a more defensive way. Dazai didn’t fail to
notice how he stood a little straighter when facing Kunikida who greeted him with as little as a nod.

“Car crash, happened an hour ago. Both the driver and the passenger have deceased. This is the fourth car crash in two weeks where they all crashed into the same tree. While this by itself is interesting, I have called you for a different reason. It’s not unusual for car crashes to get messy, but this one is the first that looks like this… See for yourself.” Kunikida turned around and walked to the car, expecting them to follow him.

In the distance, Dazai made out Atsushi’s firm ‘officer-voice’, as he liked to call it, instructing every bystander to calm down and stay away from the barrier, but the upset voices didn’t calm down the least.

Judging by the impact the crash had on the chassis, the car must have had a great speed as the bonnet folded into the main body and a tire lied several feet away in the grass.

Dazai heard how Chuuya’s steps grew more hesitant the closer they got to the car but he couldn’t blame him. The scene looked appalling and nobody could have survived such a collision, but the red handprints on the windows - or at least what remained of them - and outside the door stood in extreme contrast to the white of the car’s body – a picture straight out of a horror movie.

He didn’t allow himself a moment of hesitance when he leaned forward to get a better look at the scene, careful not to touch anything, especially not the blood splatters. The stench of iron shot into his nose instantly.

Two bodies. The driver female, the passenger male.

Their throats were slashed, the stream of blood colored every piece of clothing dark red and brown.

Gashes covered every inch of exposed skin and more. Blood still dripped out of various cuts. Their suit and dress were shred to pieces.

Instead of eyes, black holes stared back at Dazai.

The step back Dazai took was too rushed, too unprepared, too uncontrolled, but he needed to put distance between him and the car. His shoulders brushed against Chuuya’s, who stood behind him and managed to get out of his way just in time, and only the touch reminded Dazai of the place he was at before memories could cover his perception of reality. The edges of his vision sharpened instantly. It always happened at such cases.

Dazai was no stranger to gore and it wasn’t what had put him off, but seeing his assumptions come true made his stomach twist.

Blue eyes watched him, narrowed in concern. Chuuya had already taken a look for himself, taking in every detail of the scene as he circled the vehicle. Dazai forced himself into a controlled stance, back straight and feet firm on the ground, ignoring Chuuya’s stare. He had no reason to worry. It’s not as if he hadn’t handled such cases before.

A sting in his hands pulled him out of his thoughts and announced the emersion of his ability, a faint blue glow already balling up in his palm. Of course that had to happen. He should have known as soon as they had turned cold. The only right response he had was to push them into his pockets again; dealing with that would have to wait until later.

Kunikida had let them explore on their own, but now he cleared his throat to gain their attention so Dazai turned to face him. “
They haven’t died from the car crash,” Dazai stated.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Kunikida retorted.

For a brief moment, Dazai considered the different stories he could tell the commissioner. He could let him stay in the dark, or tell him it was the result of a raging ghost and if Dazai managed to catch a ghost nearby in front of his eyes, Kunikida might even believe him.

Gravel crunching next to him made his eyes flicker to Chuuya who had come to stand next to him.

He still had the option to tell the truth – it would spare him keeping up two different versions between the people involved.

Chuuya hated lies. If he had learned something about his new partner over the last week, it must be his aversions to lies.

With a sigh, he decided to go with the latter, “This is the work of a creature out of this world. It has never lived a life as a human on earth.”

“You mean something like a demon?” Chuuya asked, brows furrowed in skepticism.

Dazai hummed conformingly.

“What makes you so sure of that?” Kunikida showed no sign of confusion or fear.

Briefing Kunikida on the extra-mundane world had been one of the smartest decisions Dazai had ever made, facilitating the collaboration with the police. Despite not being sighted, he had approached the topic with a calmness Dazai wished everyone possessed. Well, at least after he had declared Dazai for a schizophrenic before accepting the truth. Now, not even the mentioning of demons agitated him.

“I have seen similar scenes. Such a brute force is untypical for a ghost. I could make sure if you allowed me to touch the bodies.”

While he was pretty sure already, all signs hinting at a demonic attack, to make sure his theory was correct a little detail remained to be investigated.

Kunikida handed him a pair of latex gloves without comment, understanding that if he wanted Dazai’s help he needed to let him do his job, and Dazai turned away from the head of the police to put them on. The glow on his hands had yet to disappear and while Kunikida had seen his ability before, he didn’t need to right now. He didn’t have to know that he wasn’t in full control currently and Dazai internally cursed the energy surrounding the scene.

Having been sure that he had been quick enough with putting the gloves on for nobody to notice the blue light, his eyes widened just a fraction when he noticed Chuuya’s questioning gaze.

When had he become so inattentive that he forgot about Chuuya? No, not inattentive. When had he become so unconcerned if Chuuya watched or not?

Dazai shrugged in response. He would fill him in later when they discussed some matters on how to handle this case properly.

As he walked over to the car again, Chuuya followed him where some officers had gathered to collect evidence. Kunikida sent them away with a motion of his hand before leaving them alone, allowing Dazai to crouch down next to the now open but deformed door and to handle the bodies
without disturbance. Taking a deep breath, inhaling the sharp scent of iron once more, he tried to withdraw any energy that collected in his hands and when he extended them, the glow disappeared, although his hands remained cold. Thank god.

Chuuya stood close enough so Dazai could hear him breathing. As long as he didn’t block out the light he could watch - he had to learn anyway.

Dazai reached for the chin of the male corpse and tilted it upwards, revealing the bare throat and the crust of dried blood broke as the slash opened, causing the last drops of blood to seep. If the metallic stench had already filled the space before, it now intensified. Chuuya gulped next to Dazai’s ear, his throat probably closing up. Dazai could imagine how he felt; his first encounter with so much blood had ended with him vomiting in shock and disgust. Chuuya either had a strong stomach when it came to gore or he had seen such scenery before; Dazai couldn’t tell.

Nowadays, blood didn’t cause any reaction in Dazai. It had become a familiar sight, even an enjoyable one at times, reminding him of how much alive he still was – though, he didn’t know how enjoyable that was after all. The blue gloves covered in red smears immediately as he moved the head from side to side, looking for a specific clue.

Chuuya’s breathing became more and more stagnant, but he stayed at Dazai’s side.

“If you are going to puke, please do it out of reach or I might charge you with cleaning,” Dazai’s thumb swiped over a particularly bloody spot on the victim’s neck.

“I’m fine,” Chuuya said with gritted teeth; Dazai heard the tension. If he said so.

With a nail he scratched at the dried blood. There it was - the sign he had expected but not hoped to find. Seeing it erased every last trace of doubt.

“Chuuya, look. Do you see this?” The other scooted closer, almost lying on Dazai’s shoulder in order to get a better look, “This is the mark of a demon, which appears on every body harmed by a demon. I don’t recognize this one, but we can look it up later. Would you take a picture, please?”

They were looking at a circle with a serpentine line in the middle which flowed into tiny loops, carved into the now pale skin and if you watched intently, you made out the devil’s tail on the left side. In the back of his mind the sign appeared familiar, probably from the times he had flipped through his demonic encyclopedia, but he struggled to match it with a name.

Chuuya pulled his phone out of his pockets to snap a picture. “Just to make it clear; they died in the crash because a demon attacked them, right?”

“The demon mutilated them, but didn’t cause them to crash.”

“What makes you think so?”

Dazai really should work on the habit of assuming Chuuya knew such things. “Because this is the fifth crash this month, I highly doubt it to be a coincidence. There must be another reason. Let’s talk to the witnesses; maybe we can gain some information.”

Chuuya eyed him questioningly but didn’t argue.

Kunikida was already talking to a woman who seemed rather upset, wildly gesturing with her hands, and a man who happened to be the exact opposite, calm and unruffled. As he talked to them, he scribbled notes into his notebook. Dazai assumed they were the witnesses.
The woman blew her nose into a paper tissue when he and Chuuya joined the conversation. To Dazai’s surprise, the man just smiled sadly but didn’t appear to be affected by the car crash.

“It’s a pity what happened. Steinbeck had always been such an ambitious man, he still had his entire life ahead of him,” he told Kunikida.

“It seems you have known the victims. Which relation did you have?” Dazai interfered, starting to interrogate the man while scrutinizing him at the same time, taking in every piece of information he could gain. While his observation skills weren’t on par with Ranpo’s, he still claimed them to be well trained. The man’s suit fit his figure like a second skin, obviously fitted to his rather plump body. In fact, the suit resembled the one the male victim, apparently called Steinbeck, wore and the tie had the exact same shade of green.

“I’m sorry but who are you?” The man narrowed his eyes at Dazai’s question. Some people had to complicate everything with unnecessary things and Dazai fought the urge to roll his eyes but for the sake of not wasting any more time, he plastered on the politest smile he could manage.

“My bad, my name is Dazai, and I am an external investigator as we have reason to suspect outer influence,” a sentence he had said so many times over the past few years, he could recite it in his sleep, “And this is Chuuya, my partner. I apologize if the questions have been asked prior to my arrival, but I prefer to hear stories from first hand. I take it you are one of the witnesses.”

The man didn’t seem convinced by his tale but he needn’t to be as long as he told them the story.

“Herman Melville. John Steinbeck was a coworker of mine.”

Dazai wanted to ask ahead, but Chuuya already continued, “Can you tell us what happened? Or at least what you have seen?”

Sometimes Dazai forgot Chuuya was around, too used to working alone. He tried to remind himself of letting Chuuya work as much as possible, and while old habits were difficult to let go, Chuuya did a great job with taking over whenever he deemed it right. Dazai smiled to himself. He really had made quite the catch with Chuuya.

“We were on the way to a business meeting, where we would get lunch. His wife was invited to come along, so she picked him up. I was driving behind them, when they suddenly came off street and crashed into the tree.”

“Do you happen to know why they crashed?” Chuuya continued but Melville shook his head.

“And why were you not in the car with them if you were going together?” Dazai asked.

“We live on opposite sides of towns. It would be inconvenient to play drop-off service after the dinner; therefore, I went on my own.”

“Where do you work again?”

“Fitzgerald’s Guild – Construction Company.”

The name rung a bell in Dazai but he didn’t know why. He really needed to sleep, his memory being extraordinarily patchy today. He knew the company, had heard of it, and he was also sure he knew something else about it. But as much as he tried to remember where the name had been mentioned before, it didn’t occur to him.

Out of nowhere, the sting in his hands reappeared and Dazai balled them into fists inside his
pockets. It always happened when demonic energy lingered and a voice in his head scolded him for being so inattentive.

“They cut off the road, just like that?” Chuuya asked.

“Exactly. I cannot imagine why, I haven’t seen anything. Suddenly they just crashed, and I pulled over immediately.”

“So you haven’t observed anything extraordinary?”

“No, I didn’t even get close there, I immediately called the police. It was an unfortunate incident, happens to the best of us.”

Dazai didn’t get to open his mouth, as the lady was already snapping at Melville. “How can you be so cold? You’ve seen your coworker die! Don’t you have a heart?”

Her entire body shook in anger and distress, her eyes swollen and red from crying, her demeanor a complete contrast to the man’s, who only shrugged.

“I didn’t know him well.”

“Excuse me, Miss, may I know your name?” Dazai addressed her. What an interesting conversation this turned out to be.

“Naomi Tanizaki. I was crossing the street when the crash happened. But other than that moron I actually saw something.” The glare she casted the man as she said that would have killed him if it could.

Dazai’s head tilted in question. “Do you care to tell what you observed?”

“I don’t know why they crashed, but immediately after, black fog emerged from the inside.”

Melville huffed in disapproval, interrupting her, “Of course it did, something was burning, that’s normal with car crashes.”

She stomped her foot in rage and despite her sorrow, a glint of anger flashed up in her eyes and while Dazai respected that kind of investment, personally he believed it to be a limitation to productivity and objectivity. Reality easily discolored when emotions were involved.

“I know that. But this was different. It was pitch black and it moved, but not like normal fog does. It was swirling and spinning and sometimes streaks of it jerked around and red flashes lighted up inside and it just wasn’t normal!”

At the description, Dazai’s eyes widened; not enough for anyone to notice but yet. What she described sounded like the perfect example of a demonic attack, so maybe her perception hadn’t fooled her.

Chuuya licked his lips as he listened to Naomi attentively. Dazai practically heard the gears in his mind rattling. He had intended on teaching Chuuya about demons some time and if he had known they were to deal with one so soon, he would have at least explained the basics, but now Chuuya had to learn as they went. Dazai knew how hard and confusing it could be, but Chuuya was smart, he would catch up. Did it ease the faint trace of guilt pounding in his chest? No.

“I call bullshit,” Melville frowned and crossed his arms, “It probably was just the shock. You’re just a scared girl, you were imagining things.”
“I was not! It’s not my fault you have no eyes in your head.”

Dazai couldn’t stop the snort that escaped him, the girl’s temperament being truly admirable but it was quickly wiped away when Chuuya stepped onto his toes, reminding him of how inappropriate he was being. Collecting himself, Dazai gulped the smile down, “I think that’s all for now. Thank you for your cooperation.”

A tilt of his head signaled Chuuya to follow him and as he walked away he listened to Kunikida, who had been considerate enough to cede priority to him, continuing his own interrogation. Dazai swiftly turned around to face Chuuya when he deemed them to be far away enough.

“Chuuya, what do you think?”

An eyebrow quirked, Chuuya stared at him in silence before slowly repeating the question. “You want me to tell you what I think?”

“Well, that’s what I asked for.”

Chuuya took a brief moment of consideration before answering.

“I think that this is crazy. People keep crashing into trees for unknown reasons, a pair gets shred into pieces by a demon that’s on the loose and the two witnesses weren’t helpful either, except that I think I know now how a demonic attack looks like,” hands thrown into the air in despair, Chuuya looked lost, “To be honest, now that we know it’s a demon that mutilated them, I don’t even know what we’re doing here. It’s not as if we can catch the demon now, right?”

Swaying from side to side, Dazai weighted Chuuya’s statements, “You are right on the demon. Right now, we can’t do anything about it other than being on alert. In order to catch it we have to come up with a plan. But I have to disagree on the car crash part. I know very well why they happened.”

Blue eyes blinked at him, mouth slightly parted as if he wanted to say something but didn’t know what, drawing a lopsided smile from Dazai. “Look around Chuuya. What do you see?”

He watched as Chuuya observed the area with brows knitted in confusion. For a short moment he thought about pinching him to get the frown out of his face just to annoy him, but decided against it. Chuuya wouldn’t be able to refocus again, his temper too short and he should learn how to take in details. Noticing subtle abnormalities could make or break a case. Honestly, it was endearing how hard he tried and still failed to notice.

Meanwhile, the crowd around the scene had thinned out; only half of the initial gawkers lingered behind the barrier.

“Dazai, there’s nothing wrong”, Chuuya finally said.

“Then you aren’t looking close enough.”

“I have, but- Oh.”

Dazai followed his glare and nodded in approval. It had taken him a while, but at last he saw it. Amidst the crowd, a woman who nobody paid attention to, was crying, surrounded by a yellow glow and while he had already noticed her earlier amongst the other ghosts who had come to gawk, he had prioritized the car crash and its victims.

“You think she caused the car crashes?” Now Chuuya followed his drift.
“There’s one way to find out. Get her to the side. I can’t touch her right now.”

Chuuya got the hint and nodded. The risk of his ability activating between all the civilians was just too high right now.

Kunikida shouted at them, something about being responsible for once, as they left the scene without as much as a word to get to the woman. Dazai ignored him and as they passed her, Chuuya grabbed her arm and pulled her aside without anybody noticing what he did. When his finger closed around her wrist she cried out in surprise, but she didn’t try to escape his grip, too shocked that one saw, even touched her. He pulled her out of ear shot and out of sight from the policemen and gawkers and Dazai trailed after them, making sure nobody grew suspicious.

“Who are you?” Dazai didn’t bother with courtesies. If he was correct, she was only a tiny puzzle piece in this case, a mere trigger, while the demon presented the vital key piece - and in fact the more pressing matter.

“Sasaki.” She wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. Black hair stuck to the wet places on her cheek. She once must have been a beautiful woman, but now her white skin stuck out in contrast to her hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. Her extra-mundane energy appeared to be so strong that her body held tight onto the appearance she had the moment she died.

“Tell us, what happened.” Dark eyes stared at him before another wave of tears overcame her and she sobbed, loud and messily. He only sighed.

“Stop being an uncultivated swine, holy. You can do better,” Chuuya hissed at him, shoving him aside and carefully placed a hand on Sasaki’s shoulder, his expression softening on the spot. “It’s alright, you don’t have to worry, we are not here to cause any trouble. Do you feel fine to share what you have seen? It would help us a lot.”

Voice soft as melting chocolate, Dazai observed how Sasaki locked eyes with Chuuya as her sobs quieted down. It would be a lie to say he was surprised, as everybody would have been intrigued by that smile, so gentle it could impossibly be an act. Under no circumstances Dazai would have been able to recreate it, although being a notorious actor when it came to emotions - at least he had been told so.

Unable to withstand, Sasaki whispered, “I don’t want them to crash, but I forget to be careful. I thought I saw him, but it was just a trick of my mind.”

“So whom?”

“My husband. He must be somewhere, I know it, but he hasn’t come for me, yet.”

Casting a quick glance over his shoulder, Chuuya raised an eyebrow at Dazai and the silent conversation that followed was apparent; Sasaki and her husband died three weeks ago in a terrible car crash, the story had been all over the local news. They both have been buried days after at the cemetery.

Now Dazai understood where she came from. “I can help you, taking away whatever makes you visible to others. Nobody will be scared of you again,” Dazai said, tone gentler now.

Eyes widened at his words, desperate for relief, “You can do that?”

“If you give me your hand. I also might have an idea where your husband is.”

Chuuya’s hand slipped of her shoulder when she extended a hand for Dazai’s without questioning
any of it. “You do?”

“Yes.”

Sasaki wasn’t to blame. While it might be true that she caused those awful accidents, she was just another ghost chasing after an unfulfilled desire. At least she seemed aware of her death and ready to leave this demise behind, which made dealing with her easier.

He gripped her hand firmly and the second Dazai made contact with her, blue light emerged between them as if it had been waiting for the moment and was now taking advantage of the freedom it was offered. The sting in his palm grew more painful with every second but Dazai didn’t dare pulling away just yet, fearing he wouldn’t extract all the extra-mundane energy. Strings of light pulsed with energy and danced speedier than usual and Dazai found himself unable to look away, despite being blinded by the brightness. Seeing it acting so forcefully was rare, but the combination of the demonic energy in the air and her high capacity sufficed to have it go feral. Those were moments he couldn’t help but think of his ability as beautiful.

Finally, it calmed and vanished and he took it as a sign to let go of her. Dazai blinked to adjust his eyes to the new light and in front of him stood an entirely new woman with tidy clothes and not a peck of dirt on her.

Stretching her arms out in front of her she inspected them in disbelief; a reaction Dazai had already anticipated, so he turned attention to his own hands, still cold as ever, but at least his ability didn’t force itself to the surface anymore.

He didn’t hear Sasaki’s question, only perceived Chuuya’s answer and his head shot up.

“Look out for him at the cemetery. He might be waiting for you there. I really hope you can find peace now.” Of course Chuuya had understood what Dazai had hinted at.

She nodded in understanding.

“Thank you,” addressing the both of them, but she only made eye-contact with Dazai, “May I go now?”

Simultaneously with Chuuya saying ‘yes’, Dazai answered, “Not yet.”

Chuuya squinted at him, but Dazai kept his eyes on Sasaki, “I have one last question. Did you see what happened after the car crash?”

By the way she bit her lip, Dazai immediately knew she did, “It would be very helpful to know. It would not affect you in any way.”

One of her hands crossed her chest to wrap around the other upper arm, closing up her posture and Chuuya sighed before retaining the gentle voice from earlier.

“Sasaki, please. You have nothing to fear, but you could help to save lives.”

The woman whimpered.

“I didn’t see a lot apart from black fog emerging and raging. I was scared, so I hid as quickly as I could. But I caught a glimpse of whatever rampaged in there. A human like figure, with horns and dark wings. It limped away, but I don’t know where it went, it suddenly disappeared. It almost saw me; I just wanted to get away.”
Well, it was something, but Dazai couldn’t say it helped a lot as this was how most demons looked like, or at least those he had faced in the past; however, it surprised him that the demon dared to take on his appearance here in this realm- very daring.

“Dazai, where are you?” Kunikida’s voice sounded from behind, along with footsteps, making Dazai turn on his heels. From the corner of his eye he saw Chuuya shushing away Sasaki, and she sprinted away without second thought. Hopefully they had been able to help her.

“Yes Kunikida?” Innocence dripped from his tongue as he patiently waited for an answer.

The commissioner gritted his teeth in anger. “I called you in for help, and yet you keep disappearing. If you don’t have anything significant for me rather than a demon killed the pair, then you may as well leave.” Index finger pushing the glasses up the nose, the man’s eyebrows furrowed.

With his hands clasped behind his back, Chuuya looked even smaller, if not younger, hadn’t it been for the confident glint in his eyes, as he stepped close to Dazai. “But Kunikida, there’s no reason to be angry with us. While we can’t do anything about the demon, we took care of the car crashes. This should have been the last one in a while.”

“You did?”

“If you really think of us to be this useless, then why do you even bother calling me?” At Dazai’s cocky retort, Kunikida’s grip around the notebook tightened, just as Dazai had had hoped it would, before giving an explanation.

“A lady who deceased several weeks ago here at the same spot, you surely remember, roamed around in search for her husband. But you don’t have to worry any longer, she won’t cause any more inconveniences.”

“And the demon? What will you do about that one?”

Shrugging, Dazai gave the only answer he was ready to give in this situation.

“I don’t know. For now, we must wait. I have yet to come up with a plan.”

Kunikida’s eyes narrowed even more, not expecting Dazai to not know an answer as the man always had solutions ready in his sleeve like a magician had cards by hand at all times, but refrained from commenting on it, nodding in acknowledgement instead. He might have been right to be doubtful, but he needn’t to know.

Dazai’s smile didn’t falter as he leaned forward. Kunikida hated it when he came too close.

“If you would excuse us, I think our job here is done. We’ll see you around.”

He had to get them away from here, away from the multitude of ears that might spy on their conversation and it wasn’t in Dazai’s interest to reveal demons’ existence to anybody who wasn’t meant to know.

Just as Chuuya had done with Sasaki, he grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him away from the crime scene in a hurry. He had a plan about their further approach and in order to pull it off sagely it would be useful to have Chuuya’s ability by his side. Now time had come to discuss more serious matters.

Chuuya didn’t yelp when he got dragged along but rather hissed at the unexpected touch.
“Shit, your hands are freezing. Let me go or I’ll get frostbites! I am behind you anyway.”

Dazai did as asked, but only stopped when sure that the area was quiet enough – a rarely visited street further away from the car crash. No cars passed by, no other people, just what he needed.

Chuuya rubbed the spot where Dazai’s hand had met his skin, cursing when he noticed the red spot that had appeared. Dazai should have known better than to assume his ability had cooled down to normal just yet, feeling a little sorry, but not enough to put more thought into it.

“Chuuya, I have a plan.”

Confused eyes met his, “I thought you said you didn’t know what to do and that we must wait?”

“Kunikida doesn’t have to know everything. We are going to summon a demon,” Dazai said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. He had no reason to make a bigger deal out of it than necessary, he had done it before. Admittedly, those encounters were not fun and hard to handle, but with Chuuya by his side he had no doubt they would manage.

“Like, for real? Like they do in movies?”

“Kind of, it’s almost the same. But from there on we can remand him to hell,” now, a gist of enthusiasm filled Dazai’s voice, alone the thought of the process triggering excitement. He shouldn’t be excited. He should know how badly it could end. But at the same time, he was curious about how Chuuya would handle the situation.

“And how do you do that?”

“Leave that to me, you will have to take care of something else.”

“What?”

Dazai almost wanted to put his hands on Chuuya’s shoulders, but decided not to do so last second, letting his arms drop to his side.

“Your job. Having my back. Demons can get pretty violent, but with your ability you could keep them at bay.”

If Chuuya really could control extra-mundane energy, which he didn’t question due to Ranpo’s expertise opinion, he could keep the demon away from him long enough to perform the banishment without disturbance and keep them both unharmed. At least that’s how he imagined it, as the last times the procedure had dragged on much longer than anticipated just because the demons had kept lashing out on him and in addition to exiling them, he had to avoid their numerous attacks.

It also happened to be the reason he had to execute methods he usually kept away from. Repeating them was not on his wish list.

Chuuya blinked at him in silence first. “I cannot control them enough to be helpful, you know that.”

The finger that booped Chuuya in the nose lingered, and Chuuya’s eyes slowly wandered down to watch the hand before returning to Dazai’s face, on which a smile had appeared as he watched the confused expression. He was fully aware that he was disrespecting Chuuya’s personal space now, but he couldn’t care less, a playful grin flashing up.
“Don’t pull a Kunikida. I do have a plan for that. We are going to train your powers over the course of the week.”

“And the demon?” Was he imagining it or had Chuuya’s voice lost the usual force behind it?

“The process will require a lot of preparation I will take care of. You must only worry about your ability for now.” He let his fingers drop from Chuuya’s nose, now red from the coldness of his hand, “I also have the perfect plan on how you are going to train.”

Expectant eyes looked at him. To Dazai’s surprise, Chuuya didn’t argue. Maybe he himself was curious about his ability and training would give him the perfect opportunity to find out more about it. Additionally, Dazai would get the chance to evaluate its real power.

“No, I won’t tell you which one. And no, I don’t know when. I will text you as soon as I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
The text message came the next afternoon, when Chuuya and Kouyou were watching a movie, making up for their missed, weekly meeting as he still had met with Akutagawa yesterday where he had pried every chunk of personal information out of him he could get. Now, they were lounging on the couch in Chuuya’s apartment, wrapped up in blankets while stuffing in any snacks they had managed to find when rummaging through his kitchen. He cherished these moments more than anything. They were homely, cozy and familial and they always made him feel like he had never moved out in first place. Although it had been his own choice, a big apartment could be lonely at times.

At first, he ought to ignore the messages in favor of enjoying the time with Kouyou but as the familiar pling chimed in shorter intervals with every message, he let his arm flop to the side where his phone lay on the cushion and forcefully typed in his code. Ignoring Dazai always ended up this way.

Kouyou stopped shoving a handful of chips into her mouth and eyed Chuuya as he read through the messages with a frown, not paying attention anymore, before she paused the movie.

Mackerel
[3:31 pm] *picture*
  Looks familiar?
[3:36 pm] That’s the same as on the victim’s
[3:42 pm] It’s the sign of Asmodeus, if that tells you anything.
[3:45 pm] *picture*
  That’s how he looks like. He’s a prince, associated with lust
[3:46 pm] So if you want to get into some steamy stuff, that’s the one to worship
[3:49 pm] Anyhow, as far as your training is concerned, do you have time today?
[3:50 pm] Like, in 10 minutes?
[3:51 pm] maybe not 10, but as soon as you can?
[3:53 pm] Chuuya
  Don’t ignore me. We have things to take care of
  Don’t let our helpers wait too long

With his head falling back against the rest, Chuuya shut his eyes and groaned, a hand running down his face in frustration. The familiar annoyance caused by Dazai’s vagueness boiled up in his stomach. He considered refusing to train today, but then he read about the helpers, who apparently
were already waiting. While he had no idea how many people Dazai planned to involve, canceling would throw off multiple people’s schedules.

But agreeing would mean to leave his couch and Kouyou and up until now he had really enjoyed their quality time and he didn’t fancy going out today.

The woman’s gaze still rested on him when he reopened his eyes and her lips pushed forward, her sign of showing him that she already knew what he had to say.

“Let me guess, work is calling.” She put the bowl of Dorito’s aside to prop up her arm and rest her head on the head lazily.

“I can cancel,” a part of him wished she would say ‘please’, making him stay at home with her and acting as if he never got any texts. But she didn’t and shook her head disapprovingly, pinning him down with strict eyes.

“Oh no, you are going, we can hang out another time. You’ve just recently got that job, you are not going to slack on that one.”

He recognized that voice. She was pulling the figure of authority on him and although he was way past the age of having to listen to her words, his stomach still dropped a little as she put him in line. After all these years he had been conditioned to listen to that voice.

His lips pressed into a thin line as he stared her down as annoyed as he could, but she stared back equally intensely until he gave in with a sigh.

“Okay, I’ll text him and go on my way.”

“That’s a good boy,” the smile she offered only meant to taunt him, and he stuck out his tongue at her before texting Dazai back.

**Chuuya**

[3:57 pm] I can get out of house in 10 minutes  
   Where do we meet?

The answer followed within seconds.

**Mackerel**

   Can you pick me up, then I can tell you

Chuuya’s eyebrows shot up. He had offered him a ride every day the past week and Dazai had declined with a consistency. He asking for a ride on his own was unexpected, but Chuuya wouldn’t reject.
Chuuya
[3:58 pm] Sure, where are you?

Mackerel
[3:59 pm] Morrison Bridge

Chuuya
[3:59 pm] I’ll be there in 7

With that he jumped off the couch and hurried to the bedroom to replace his sweat pants with something more appropriate for publics, even if it were his worn-out jeans that threatened to rip at the seams any moment. But they were comfortable and he could move freely in them, which was exactly what he needed.

The second he returned to the living room he knew Kouyou disapproved of his choice of clothes, but she remained silent, well aware that she had no deal with his life choices as simple as that one.

“You know your way around, don’t you?” Chuuya stupidly asked, as he opened the closet and pulled out two leather jackets with incorporated protectors and grabbed the keys from the hook next to the front door. Now that Chuuya didn’t occupy any of the space, Kouyou had resumed watching the movie and stretched her legs over the entire couch.

“Just get out, don’t be late.” She continued to eat the snacks at hand and Chuuya disappeared with a last wave before closing the door behind him and hurrying down the stairs to the parking garage.

While picking up somebody generally turned out to be easier by car, he opted for the bike if he didn’t want to keep anyone waiting longer than necessary.

As he pulled the cover back to reveal a bright red Fireblade, pride filled his chest at the sight of his masterpiece. Over the last few years, he had put a lot of effort and money into modifying it to his liking and to maximize its performance, resulting in a high-speed monster on the roads. Riding it never ceased to have adrenaline rushing through his veins or to have his heart rate picking up along with the speed. Taking in his baby, he admitted to himself with a hint of shame that he had neglected it over the past few weeks but he promised to change that in near future as he shrugged into one jacked, put on his helmet and stuffed the other into the top case next to the spare helmet.

The roar of the engine echoed through the entire space but to him it sounded as soothing as a kitten-purr. He needed to remind himself what his intentions were in order to not just drive off for a trip, having missed the vibration of the machine running through his body.

Swift moves steered the bike out of the garage and revved up the engine high enough for the roar to be heard up the street. He raced down too fast for the short distance he needed to cover, yearning for the freedom that came with it. Only when the bridge came in sight just seconds later, he slowed down, on the lookout for that familiar mop of brown hair.

He spotted Dazai sitting on the railing close to the end of the bridge, oddly casually dressed, and pulled over, where he shut down the engine to get the helmet and the jacket out. He didn’t even wonder what Dazai did here, having come to terms that he was just strange in his own ways.
Dazai had obviously heard the stopping bike and turned around, giving Chuuya a good laugh as his eyes widened in shock.

“You are not expecting me to get on that,” he said as he got off the railing, wasting to time with greeting him.

Chuuya pushed the helmet into his hands. “I sure am, so get on, we shouldn’t keep anyone waiting any longer.”

“I have considered death but you have a serious death wish.”

The casual allusion didn’t go unnoticed by Chuuya but for the sake of avoiding conflict he chose to ignore it for now. That didn’t mean it didn’t stick with him.

“As long as I drive, we should be perfectly safe,” Chuuya reassured as he helped him slide into the jacket, “just hold onto me tightly. Where do we go?”

“Industrial district.”

Chuuya slid into his seat and he felt the hind of the bike plummeting as Dazai slid behind him, hands hesitantly wrapping around his waist. Chuuya flinched at the unfamiliar touch, almost unnoticeable but yet. He looked back to brief him on the last important details.

“Keep your feet on the footrest at all times. Other than that, don’t lean to one side, I am not heavy enough to balance it if you drop over, understood?”

Dazai nodded.

“Good, then let’s go.”

As soon as he restarted the engine he already speeded up, giving Dazai no time to adjust and drawing a horrified scream from him. Centrifugal force pulled the other back some inches and Chuuya felt the grip around his middle tightening, squeezing him. He had told him to hold on tightly.

How much he had missed this feeling of freedom, of being unrestricted and of being faster than the wind. Leaning into every curve, meandering through the standing traffic and maxing out the speed as much as possible with the additional weight were another definition of ‘home’ to him. Usually he went on rides alone; therefore, Dazai was a foreign but not unwelcome addition. Admittedly, it was nice to feel his body flush against his own, knowing that the man willingly put his life into Chuuya’s hands. He could feel how tense his muscles were, only loosening up after a couple of miles. His chest was warm to his back in contrast to the cold wind that leaked through his clothes.

The ride ended quicker than Chuuya liked to, but he reluctantly parked next to an abandoned factory.

Dazai slid off first with trembling legs and pulled the helmet off his head.

“You. You are a maniac,” he breathed.

Flashing him a grin, Chuuya secured the helmets on the rear mirrors, “I had everything under control at all times. We arrived safe and sound, didn’t we?”

Dazai didn’t answer but handed him the jacket and Chuuya draped it over the seats along with his
own, sure that nobody would steal it in an area as abandoned as this. Dazai had lead him to an empty parking lot next to an old factory that must have been shut down more than a decade ago if Chuuya went by the multiple cracks in the concrete walls and the ivy vines that winded up the sides. Nobody else in sight, Chuuya’s attention was caught by a familiar black car. A car he had helped picking out. What was Akutagawa doing here?

He intended to ask Dazai about it but a voice from inside beat him to it.

“Of course it’s your swanky bike. We’ve been here for half an hour, I should have known better than to assume you could be on time.” Akutagawa reclined to the sides of a gap in the wall where once a door must have been. Next to him, a girl in combat boots and ripped jeans swayed nervously from one side to another. Gin was here too?

Why on earth would Dazai choose them as their helpers, for his training? To his knowledge, neither of them had an ability. But then behind Akutagawa Rashoumon appeared out of thin air and Chuuya understood – at least Akutagawa’s role.

“Hey Gin, looking badass today!” Cheeks flushed, she shyly turned away from Dazai’s ‘thumbs up’ but with a faint smile on her lips. Chuuya remembered her differently form the night in the bar. Had something changed?

Passing by, he barely comprehended Dazai’s whispering, “Don’t worry, she’s always that shy when sober. She’ll warm up,” and he made his way into the factory.

When inside, they formed a circle around Dazai. Everyone had their arms crossed in front of their chest, waiting for an instruction. It comforted Chuuya that he apparently wasn’t the only one without a clue what to do.

He expected Dazai to tell them their job and begin practice. What he hadn’t expected was him to open the zipper of his sweat-shirt jacket and revealed a set of knives to them just to pull out the first one smoothly. His muscles tensed up instantly, ready to defend himself if needed.

But Dazai didn’t sling it at him. Instead he hurled it at Gin who caught it midair with a confident glint in her eyes, earning an approving nod from Dazai.

Right, Gin was good with throwing knives, now he remembered.

Dazai cast a drawn out look around.

Okay, we all know why we are here. Thank you for agreeing to this, although I know how hard it must be,” Dazai firstly addressed Akutagawa.

“As long as Rashoumon stays unhurt,” but judging by his displeased grimace he really wasn’t really on board. The demon-dog had curled up between his legs in a tight ball.

“How did he even get ahold of you?” Chuuya asked his friend, seriously curious.

Face blank, as if the answer should have been obvious, Akutagawa murmured, “Atsushi.”

Only Atsushi could have convinced him to agree, the boy being too persuasive for his own good with his big puppy eyes. Chuuya huffed in understanding.

Dazai continued to inform them about his plans.

“Chuuya, you will be standing in the middle. Take those awful gloves of. Your powers won’t need
restrictions today, we want to go full force.” Well aware that Dazai had just insulted his choice of
clothing, again, Chuuya wanted to throw a snarky remark in his face. Then, he came up with a
better idea. The next second, a glove hit Dazai - right in his face.

Gin snorted, Akutagawa hid a chuckle behind a hand, but Dazai didn’t as much as glare at him as
he continued, much to Chuuya’s disappointment.

“Akutagawa, I want you to send Rashoumon chasing Chuuya. He should attack him, bite him,
whatever. Chuuya’s utter goal is to keep Rashoumon at bay. Hear that Chuuya? Not to hurt
Rashoumon. If you want to throw things around, do it with the knives Gin will fling at you, just
don’t hit us.”

“But aren’t these just normal knives?” Chuuya didn’t quite grasp it yet.

“Of course they are not. These are extra knives from my personal collection, soaked in extra-
mundane energy. You will be able to handle them. Everybody ready? Then get into position.”

All Chuuya took out of the talk was that he would be in actual danger in a few seconds. If his
ability failed now, he could as well end up dead. Wasn’t it supposed to protect him in fist line? He
really hoped it would now.

The Akutagawa siblings positioned themselves in safe distance from him and Chuuya eyed them
attentively, just waiting for the first blow. He barely had brought his feet apart to gain steadiness
when a black shadow with red eyes charged at him.

The tingle in his hand appeared instantly and formed a red shield around him when he brought his
hand up. Rashoumon ran into it at full speed. Chuuya felt nothing of the impact.

However, with his shield dropping, Rashoumon regained posture and had his teeth pulled back into
a snarl. For the first time, he looked very much like the demon it was.

Keeping the demon off wasn’t as much of a physical challenge as a mental one. There was no real
need to balance or to perform extraordinary dodges. His concentration was solely on envisioning
the energy needed and while it summoned easily, collecting willingly in his hand, he struggled
with keeping it controlled. Just the slightest bit too much would send Rashoumon flying and he
knew Akutagawa would never forgive him for hurting his precious pet.

His ability was a fire rushing through his veins, conveying an energy he now realized he had
longed for his entire life. This was part of him and now he got the chance to unleash the power..

A kick into the air carried enough power to pitch Rashoumon back but it landed on its feet
securely, now growling in anger. Instantly, it went for him again. The demon tried to bite him into
the leg again and Chuuya noticed last second, shoving him back without touching him.

Then, the first knife came flying. And a second one. And a third one.

Each of them he stopped mid-air where they hovered uselessly, surrounded by a red glow.

With every knife thrown into his direction, he had to put less and less effort into focusing on
stopping them. Hearing their swish in the air and the knowledge about their presence sufficed. He
knew that the red enclosed him entirely. He saw it around his arms, his mid and his legs.

As he stood in the middle of the hall, one hand directed at Rashoumon to lock him in place, the
knives remained floating without Chuuya looking at them. They simply did as long as he kept their
presence in the back of his mind.
He couldn’t help the grin that spread on his lips or the confident and self-pleased sparkle in his eyes that almost mocked the three in front of him.

In his mind, the energy around the knives twisted and so it did, making them spin around so the tips now pointed at the three of them. His train of thoughts stopped. Would he really dare doing this? Was he really confident enough in his own skills yet? But the energy felt so familiar, so natural and so controlled. It felt as if he had done this his entire life. So he dared.

In a red flash three knives shot forward, directly at his friends.

Inches away from their chests, they stopped abruptly to hover midair.

Gin shrieked in fear. Akutagawa stumbled backwards. Only Dazai remained where he was, hands in his pockets. His gaze flicked to the knife first, then back to Chuuya’s face, where the grin spread even further now, and slowly, ever so slowly, he pulled out his hands and began clapping.

“Well done. Maybe a bit too self-confident but you did it.” The knives dropped to the ground with a clattering when Dazai moved forward to approach him.

A sharp whistle called Rashoumon back and Chuuya released his grip on the demon, letting it hurry back to its now-owner and the last glint of red disappeared, the ability having retracted fully.

“Not scared yet?” Chuuya crossed his arms, chest puffed out as he mocked Dazai who continued to come closer until he stood right in front of him.

Suddenly, Chuuya didn’t feel as confident as before. Something in Dazai’s eyes had changed. They had darkened, almost appeared black. The corners of his lips tilted up in a faint smile but his eyes didn’t smile along. Chuuya didn’t dare to move.

Alongside his jaw a single finger traced down before pushing slightly, forcing Chuuya to tilt his chin up. Dazai was so close he could hear him breathing.

“As impressive as you are, with everything I have seen, you will never scare me, Chuuya.” The words only a whisper, Chuuya felt a shiver running down his spine. What was up with Dazai? Had he done anything to irate him?

Desperately, Chuuya searched for a hint in Dazai’s eyes, something that gave away what had caused the sudden change in behavior, but the darkness vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

With the next blink, the light was back and the grin happened to be honest, now that he patted Chuuya’s hair like one would do to praise a dog.

“Good job. You are a real talent!”

“Stop that, asshole!” A foot kicked out to push Dazai away from him. He needed space to breath.

Dazai already spun around on his heels to turn to the siblings, who had watched them silently, only to exchange confused glances. Chuuya was about to follow him, but Dazai had other things in mind.

“You can stay there; I think we’ll go –.”

He didn’t get to finish what he wanted to say. A ring of a phone interrupted him, apparently his own, and he fumbled a hand into his pocket to get it out.
“Dazai. – No. – Yes. – Where? – We’ll be there in a few.” The call lasted less than a minute, and as soon as he had hung up, he clasped his hands together.

“Oh well, no second round. That was Atsushi, he said we should have a look at something.”

Akutagawa straightened instantly.

“Atsushi? Is he alright?” The worry in his voice really touched Chuuya’s heart. When had he gotten so affectionate?

“Yes, but apparently he found something really disturbing and –.”

“I’m going with you.” The statement was final; nobody would be able to stop Akutagawa. Chuuya wouldn’t even try.

“Then I am coming along, you are my ride anyway,” Gin said.

At first, Dazai didn’t seem happy about having so many chaperons, but then he nodded in agreement, probably having come to the same conclusion as Chuuya: arguing was useless.

Chuuya already pulled out the keys, “Where do we go?”

“Roseway.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

He almost missed how skeptically Akutagawa mustered the keys in Chuuya’s hands before he turned to Dazai, “If you prefer, I can give you a ride in the car.”

He and Chuuya both waited for Dazai to reply, who seemed to seriously consider the offer. But then a playful smile played on his lips.

“Thanks, but I think I will go with Chuuya.”

Chuuya would be lying if he didn’t confess that it made his chest swell up in pride and something he didn’t know. But it felt pretty good, and warm.

As Dazai trailed after him, Chuuya flashed a mocking grin at Akutagawa.

“See, people do like my bike,” at which Akutagawa merely rolled his eyes. Last year, Chuuya had given Akutagawa a ride on his bike. It was the first and also the last time his friend came close to the Fireblade.

Chuuya overhauled the car after two turns despite them having pulled out the parking lot minutes prior.

*_*_*_*_*_*

They arrived to Atsushi sitting on the lowest step of a stair leading up to another abandoned building which, in contrast to the other, was covered in graffiti. Chuuya somewhere spotted a picture of a burning car.
Clad in uniform, Atsushi fiddled with the badge attached to the belt. He didn’t seem to recognize them at first but when they pulled off their helmets he sighed in relief.

“Thank god, I didn’t know who else to call.”

“What happened?” Dazai had already pulled the helmet off his head, not bothering with the heavy jacket, and approached Atsushi, who rose to his feet. Right where the officer’s feet had been a second ago, bloody footprints were revealed.

“See, I don’t know what happened. We got a call concerning vandalism and because all the others were busy with another missing person, Kunikida told me to have a look at it. But I don’t think that this is classified as vandalism.”

Before Dazai could inquire more information, the black car pulled over and less than a second after the engine had been shut off, Akutagawa jumped out of the vehicle, rushing to Atsushi and embracing him in a rib-crashing hug. Clearly surprised, Atsushi stumbled back a few steps, confusion written all over his face, before he returned the hug.

“What are you doing here?” Atsushi asked as a hand stroking over his boyfriend’s back.

“I wanted to make sure you were alright,” Akutagawa let go of him, just to notice the bloody footprints and gripped Atsushi’s shoulders in shock, “Is that your blood?”

Shaking his head, Atsushi negated, “Oh no! It’s from inside, I am fine!”

“Thank god.”

Gin had settled next to Chuuya, watching the scene play out and at each display of affection she uttered a gagging noise, making Chuuya snort. Although he had no siblings, he somehow understood her pain. This seemed simply unreal, this was not the Akutagawa they knew. But as long as he was happy, Chuuya could get used to a softer Akutagawa.

They let go of each other at the sound of Dazai clearing his throat, “As great as it is that nobody’s hurt, I would very much like to see what’s inside.”

Atsushi went ahead, everyone following him.

As soon as Chuuya set foot into the building, he realized what Atsushi meant. An irony smell, similar to the one surrounding the recent accident, filled the air, except that now it was three times as strong and stung in his nose. He immediately brought up one sleeve to cover his nose. This was more than disgusting and slowly an unsettling feeling began to build up in Chuuya’s stomach, growing with the darkness that surrounded them, despite it being bright daylight outside. All the windows had been taped with cardboard and foil, but through small gaps chill air breezed.

Around him, the steps of the others crunched on the dirty ground but nobody dared to speak. There was an atmosphere in the building that seemed to put everybody on edge. He didn’t realize how he tried to stay close to Dazai. The induced silence only high-lightened that no sounds from outside came through the thick concrete walls.

At the end of the hall, a faint light shone, intensifying with every foot set closer to it and Chuuya knew already that it surely didn’t come from outside. It flickered too much.

Nothing could have prepared Chuuya for what awaited him in the room, causing his stomach to drop. Akutagawa froze in place in front of him and Gin gasped for air. She might have gagged, for real this time.
Dozens of candles illuminated the small room, arranged on the edges of a pentagram drawn onto the floor with blood still wet and reflecting the light.

Blood. So much blood.

Everywhere.

On the floor, on the walls, on the window.

More blood than the one person stapled to the wall could have lost. The man’s appearance resembled the demon’s victims in every way possible as he hung on the wall with stretched out limbs, mutilated beyond recognition. Asmodeus’ mark stood out bright on his pale neck.

The smell got stuck in Chuuya’s throat and he fought the urge to vomit. He had had a hard time yesterday, but this threatened to overwhelm him.

Around the body a massive number of symbols were drawn, edgy and fluid, curvy lines and dots, none of which Chuuya recognized, safe for Asmodeus’s sign. It stood out more than the others, being bigger, along with two others.

While he felt his own knees shaking, he didn’t miss how affected his companions were, each one’s discomfort showing. Atsushi stood silently, avoiding looking at the scene with Akutagawa behind him, who hugged him tightly around the waist. Gin had stayed in the doorframe, not wanting to come closer and a little green around the edges.

And then there was Dazai, standing in front of one particular large symbol. He had extended a finger which lingered over the bloody trace, just an inch away from actually touching it. Even from afar, Chuuya saw his arm shaking, legs trembling. Something was off. Dazai always remained composed, no matter what.

“Dazai?” Chuuya tried to talk to him, but he didn’t react. Coming closer, his feet stuck to the floor; he had stepped into the drying blood, but he didn’t let his thoughts linger on that. Chuuya noticed Dazai’s wide blown eyes, unfocused and flickering – as if he wasn’t here anymore. This wasn’t good.

“Dazai!” He had stepped next to him, trying again to get to him, but Dazai still failed to hear him. What should he do? Chuuya got nervous, a sudden tightness in his chest. Dazai’s lower lip had begun trembling. He had to pull him out before he got lost where ever he was. Was this a panic attack? Multiple ideas of how to react appropriately ran through his mind, but although having learned how to deal with it, his mind stayed blank. He settled with a gentle approach, maybe it worked.

“Can you hear me?” Chuuya asked, tone low but not any less demanding than before. He feared Dazai wouldn’t hear him otherwise, “Hey, listen, I don’t know where your mind is now, but it’s not real. Hear me?”

Dazai lowered his hand at his words, away from the wall, and Chuuya breathed out in relief. At least he had heard him.

“Yeah, I know,” Dazai whispered and the look on his face turned more grounded.

“Good. We are all here, we are just looking at a case, we have done this before,” Chuuya continued. He hoped it worked, because he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to touch Dazai, unaware if it might put him off more. He had resented it when he had been younger, but he knew it helped some people. His voice was barely a whisper by now. “Can I touch you?”
Almost sure Dazai nodded slightly, he wasted no time to embrace him in a gentle hug.

Hugging was weird. Chuuya had never been a hugger, but hugging Dazai was even weirder, him being so tall and lanky. Chuuya could rest his head on his chest and he heard the rapid heart-beat against the ribcage. What had gotten into Dazai?

Slowly, long arms wrapped around him, without any pressure, and Chuuya felt Dazai’s chest rising before he exhaled deeply. As his chin lowered, Dazai rested it on top of Chuuya’s head, still breathing intensely, but his pulse had calmed. A hand pressed lightly into the small of Chuuya’s back. The gesture felt surprisingly intimate, especially as they stood amidst a crime scene. It felt so right and yet so wrong.

“I am fine,” Dazai whispered into his hair, “Thanks, chibi.”

“Hah!?” The moment over, Chuuya pulled back from the hug, putting distance between them, when he heard that stupid nickname. Dazai grinned at him, playful glint in his eyes, as if nothing had happened. He was back to normal and while Chuuya preferred him to be this way, weird and overly confident, he still didn’t get over the fact that Dazai never stopped being an asshole.

“You are insufferable,” Chuuya said.

“I know,” the smile grew wider, “But really, thank you.” The last words were meant to be heard only by him. Chuuya knew that the others watched, but he couldn’t care less, Dazai’s mental state being more important. He wouldn’t pry; he didn’t need to know, although a spark of curiosity wanted to.

Dazai being his usual self again turned to the group behind him.

“A demonic attack. But not a simple one. It is a setup, serving only the purpose of getting out attention, of mocking us.”

“How do you know?” Atsushi asked, still with his back pressed into Akutagawa’s chest.

“I recognize the symbols,” Dazai turned around to look at them, “At least two of the big ones. The left one is Asmodeus’, you might recognize it from yesterday and it’s also on the victim’s neck. He did this. Why would he do this if he didn’t plan on us finding it? Demons feast, why would he bother displaying his work in such a manner?”

What he said made sense. Those signs stood out conspicuously and the entire scene served no further purpose, as far as Chuuya understood. It was a display of power, a hint in some way. But why was the demon here, in Portland out of all places?

He asked Dazai exactly that.

“There are multiple reasons demons appear,” Dazai replied, stuffing his hands into the tiny pockets of the jacket. Chuuya might be mistaken but he could have sworn that he had caught glimpse of a subtle blue glow. “They can reach from being summoned and fulfilling a wish in exchange for the soul, to the need to feast, to following a higher demon’s command. I can’t tell. But I can say for sure: It won’t stop killing until it’s caught. The two deaths we know about now? They must be only the beginning.”

Chuuya watched him stepping over the candles, avoiding the blood traces, as he approached the sign he had been frozen solid before, “This is the sign of Erebus, ‘The King Of Darkness’, ranking almost as high as Satan himself. He must –,” Dazai stopped abruptly, shutting his mouth. His eyes went foggy for a tick, but with the next blink it was gone.
“I don’t know why his symbol is here. Yet,” is what Dazai said, “but the last one, here in the middle, I have never seen. I must look it up; maybe I can gather some information.”

“I know it.” All eyes shot to Gin. She had straightened, the color had returned to her face and now she stared at Dazai with an indescribable intensity.

“You do?” Chuuya raised an eyebrow at her answer. How would a girl that had no deal with supernatural beings know a demonic symbol?

“Yeah. It’s our company’s logo.”

The arrangement of squares and triangles fitted right in with the other symbols and only when Gin mentioned it, it dawned him that he might have seen it before. Multiple times, to be exact and he groaned internally for not having recognized it himself. He had spent almost his entire lifetime around logos, including this one.

“Fitzgerald’s guild – construction company,” he muttered into the room, before looking at Gin, “That’s it, isn’t it?”

She nodded and Chuuya’s attention fixed on Dazai on the spot, a sudden rush of adrenaline pumping through his veins. They had a lead.

“We’ve heard that before! Yesterday’s victims, weren’t they working there?”

“I know, Chuuya,” voice calm and oddly cold, Dazai’s stare directed solely at Gin.

“Gin, tell me what you know. Now.” The command unmistakable, Gin winced at his tone and Chuuya realized that he was probably missing out on information.

“Could you fill me in? I know there’s something you haven’t told me,” Chuuya chimed in.

“I –.” At a loss of words, Gin swallowed, hugging herself tightly. Chuuya felt sorry for her, although knowing he mustn’t - Gin could take care of herself. But all her vulnerability was on display, maybe because of what had happened, or maybe because of what she knew. Chuuya wouldn’t want to be in her skin right now.

Then she tried again, “There was this coworker at my workplace that had that strange presence… I can’t see ghosts, Chuuya, but I can feel one when they’re around. It’s like a shiver running down my spine. And whenever Steinbeck passed by, I felt exactly that. But now he’s dead, and I thought the feeling would vanish with him. But today, when Melville came in, I felt the exact same thing. It’s just weird.”

“Did you say Melville? Like in Herman Melville?” Chuuya enquired.

“Yes, that’s his name.”

Dazai’s groan drew their attention and they watched Dazai fall back against the wall. For once, Chuuya thanked Dazai’s weird behavior because if he hadn’t been wearing the jacket with the back protectors, this would have hurt badly.

“I am sorry Gin to tell you, but it’s not a ghost that’s attached to your coworker –“

“It’s a demon, I already got that,” she finished the sentence.

“If there’s a demon at your workplace, you probably shouldn’t go there for some time. Dazai just
said it will continue killing, what if you are next?” Akutagawa said, eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“Says the one who keeps a demon as a pet.”

Speaking of Rashoumon, Chuuya had no idea where the beast was, having probably gone invisible again as he hadn’t seen it around here. Chuuya couldn’t tell if Gin was joking or not, but Akutagawa surely wasn’t. “I always worry about you”, his features softened visibly.

“He’s right,” Dazai said, “You really should stay at home. It’s not safe there anymore. Asmodeus isn’t known for hospitality.”

“I can’t afford to stay at home! I need that job!” Arms crossed in front of her chest in expiration, Gin looked very much troubled, holding onto her job and not ready to let go.

“You might end up dead if he finds out that you know his identity,” Dazai said dryly.

Akutagawa chimed in, “You know you can always ask me for help.”

“I can do this on my own, believe me.” For a girl that small she was surely stubborn.

Why was he so left out of conversations lately, Chuuya asked himself, before asking the group, “What are you talking about?”

“She has a massive amount of student loan to pay after ditching medical school,” Akutagawa informed him, not caring about Gin’s displeasure over sharing her personal stuff, “And she refuses anyone’s help.”

“It’s not a lot I have to pay off, it will only take me one more year, or so,” Gin huffed. Though the determination in her eyes admirable, Chuuya now felt even sorrier for her. This had to be a real burden.

“So you don’t want to leave because of your debt?”

“If I stay home without reason, they will fire me.”

For all he knew, that kind of action would be typical for Fitzgerald. It had happened often enough and Chuuya didn’t have to spend a lot of thought about what he said next. He had an idea.

“How much do they pay you?”

“Two grands. Why do you -”

“I can get you a job that pays you double and more. How about that? You can start next week, have better work conditions than whatever they offer you at the Guild and are in a safe environment.”

“What?”

Chuuya understood her surprise, but why Dazai overreacted as he did, shooting up straight and gawping at him, he couldn't fully grasp. Atsushi and Akutagawa merely smiled at their reactions, both knowing very well the sources and contacts Chuuya had.

“You’ve heard me. And Dazai, I also have a plan on how to get ahold Melville.”

Dazai’s head tiled to one side. “You don’t even know how to get rid of a demon yet.”
“Do I need to, to understand that we probably have to capture him? We’ll need to have a talk about that. But I don’t think any good company would decline the deal of their life.”

Chapter End Notes

Safety-lessons with Fen:
I myself own a small motorbike, and whatever people say: It's dangerous to ride a bike without at least a helmet and a back protector. Motorbike accidents are much more likely to end fatal or with major injuries than car accidents. Despite knowing that it's not the most comfortable and looks rather bulky, I would always recommend wearing full gear. And if it fits correctly, it looks even cooler than going without protection. I might be overcautious, but rather looking a little wrapped than suffering severe injuries. The amount of fun riding the bike stays the same anyway.
Please, stay safe while riding a motorbike!

Thanks for reading! If you have any questions or theories about the story, feel free to leave a comment.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

It's backstory time, whoop! Well, at least the past of one of them gets revealed. Has anybody of you guessed or expected it? Thank you for all the kudos and comments on the last chapter, they are greatly appreciated and really made my day <3

I haven't read through the chapter yet, so I apologize if there are more mistakes in this one than usual. I will edit as soon as possible!

TW: mentioning of death of beloved ones

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After they had parted with the group, Chuuya and Dazai had decided to plot their approach on the situation, which included a more or less extensive introduction on the topic of demons. Some things Chuuya had already known, having connected some bits and pieces he had gathered at the crime scene and at the sacrifice; for example that their e.m.e. had to be stronger than ghost’s or Dazai’s ability wouldn’t react how it did.

It also was common sense that one could summon demons in a ritual and he didn’t doubt a second the aggressiveness of the creatures and their urge to kill, after having seen the scenes. He learned that high ranking demons tended to have some ghosts around them, doing the dirty work for them in exchange for prestige or something like that, which Chuuya found odd in every way, because why would a strong demon need henchmen.

What surprised him though was the process of banishing a demon. For whatever reason he had thought that Dazai’s ability would do the job.

“So you tell me you have to rely on other sources?” Chuuya asked.

“My ability only suffices when the demon’s already weakened, which is when they are already injured. I have special tools with extra-mundane energy for that.”

“What tools?”

“A variety of daggers. For example some of those I have in my sweater right now.”

Chuuya had already forgotten about them. The training already in the back on his mind, he was more focused on the most recent event. He cast a glance around, looking at the guests of the garden, and wondered if any of them suspected anything – the daggers, the blood on their shoes, the danger that lingered in the city. But nobody’s attention was on them. Why would it be?

Dazai had insisted on going to the café where Chuuya had met Dazai for the first time, and they were now sitting at the most isolated corner of the garden. It was nice to have the irony stench replaced by sweet flowers, which bloomed as beautifully as they did last week, despite the gradually sinking temperatures. Chuuya could hardly believe that the fake suicide incident had occurred merely a little over a week ago; to him it seemed to have been so much longer than that.
“My personal favorite is a revolver though,” Dazai continued.

Chuuya’s eyebrow shot up and his hands wrapped around the hot cup of tea in front of him. They weren’t cold, but he enjoyed the warmth the mug radiated, “You can shoot demons?”

“Not with a conventional weapon of course. But I have specially manufactured obsidian bullets, they to a pretty good job”. Dazai brushed a strand of hair out of his face that had fallen to cover his right eye, but he didn’t break eye-contact with Chuuya.

“Mhm”, Chuuya took a sip of the drink, thinking about what Dazai had said, “Anything else you could use?”

“Holy spells. But I only use them when nothing else helps.”

“Why so?”

Dazai shrugged, “They make demons most aggressive.”

Chuuya let his gaze wander a little as he considered the new information. His eyes fell on a little black haired girl with two ponytails that tugged at her father’s coat, demanding sweets. Cute.

Somehow he had a hard time believing what Dazai had just told him.

“Correct me if I am wrong, but if I understood correctly, in order to get rid of a demon, you have to injure it first and then you touch it, your ability does its thing and then the demon is gone?”

Dazai propped up both elbows on the table, chin resting on folded hands. “In all its simplicity, yes. But demons fight back, they can easily injure you, just with a flash of concentrated e.m.e.”

A lopsided smile appeared on Chuuya’s lips, “That’s what you have me for, remember. My ability should be able to pave you the way.”

“That’s what I was hoping for”, Dazai returned the smile, “Then we just have to get Melville to a separate place where we can perform the ‘exorcism’.

“His office won’t be private enough, right?”

Wide eyes looked at Chuuya, but he didn’t quite understand why, raising yet another eyebrow in question. “What?”

“An exorcism is nothing you can do just like that. The blast of energy that will be set free will suffice to destroy an entire high rise building. Of course we can’t do it in an office building.”

What the hell. Chuuya waited a few moments, before slowly asking “You are not joking, right?”

Dazai shook his head, “Why would I make jokes about that?”

“So you tell me, wherever we do that, the area won’t stand any longer after?”

“Right.”

The entire conversation caused more questions to come up. And there Chuuya had thought to have understood the basics of the extra-mundane world.

“Is there even a chance we survive that? Or that the original Melville will survive?”
“We can, we have our abilities. Melville however… depends on how strong his will to life is.”

That sounded more than unsettling, but Chuuya was well aware that this had to be done, for the greater good. One causality was nothing compared to the hundreds a demon could cause and Chuuya could never live with being at least partially guilty of their deaths.

He hummed absently, before answering.

“Okay. I am in.”

“I never put that in question.”

Chuuya rolled his eyes at the comment. “I also know how to separate Melville and I have an idea on where to do it.”

“Would you enlighten me? You mentioned a deal before.” Dazai had already finished his coffee and now a finger traced the rim of the cup as he tilted his head.

“Nope”, Chuuya popped the ‘p’ and flashed a grin at him, “Let yourself be surprised.”

Dazai whined, pouting at Chuuya, but Chuuya kept silent. Not even the big puppy eyes staring at him could convince him.

*_*_*_*

It had been a long time since he had pulled out the red dress shirt out of the closet, but for today’s occasion he deemed it appropriate, along with the signature hat. He had even gone with a dark blue suit jacket – damned should the cold weather be.

It had been even longer since he had set foot into the building he currently stood in front of.

Tilting his head back he let his gaze slide over the high rise building, over each floor, until the red label was in focus, reading ‘PREP’, it being as familiar to him as his last name. With a sigh he let his gaze drop to the glass doors.

‘Portland’s Real Estate Port’ stretched over the entire front, and Chuuya took a deep breath before taking the final step that made the electronic doors open.

As soon as he set foot into the building, he straightened and pushed his shoulders back. He noticed that his movements went stiff the second he passed the security door.

Not a lot had changed since the last time he had been here. The sofas, the tables and the paintings on the wall were still the same, although he wasn’t sure if one or two weren’t new and the marble floor was polished so that he saw his own reflection walking towards the reception, almost slipping as he didn’t expect the slipperiness. It even smelled identically and as much as he wanted to resent it, the citrusy smell made him smile, instantly reminding him of some of the funnier childhood events.

The receptionist, however, wasn’t the same. He had never seen the woman’s face before, for which he was rather glad or else he would have probably been forced to indulge in a conversation he didn’t want to have. He approached the reception with the most confident strides he could force
upon himself.

The lady looked up when he leaned on the counter and he didn’t miss how her gaze wandered over his entire body. She obviously had no idea who he was.

“How can I help you?” she asked, friendly but real smile on her face.

“I need to talk to Kouyou Ozaki,” he said.

The receptionist began to skim through the planner in front of her. Chuuya’s eyes followed the finger that traced down the names to the current time, where an empty slot was.

“How do you have an appointment?” she asked, “if not, you must firstly make one to speak to her.”

“I don’t think I need to make an appointment”, he replied, assertive smirk now playing his lips. It rarely happened and most of the time he escaped every situation where required, but sometimes playing with the position he had could be fun. It wasn’t that he was particularly proud of it, more the contrary as he avoided being associated with it as often as possible and he did so quite successfully. On rare occasions, however, when he felt like it, he liked to lay down the cards, if only for the shocked look on people’s faces. They never took him for the person he was, not even when he dressed nicely. He assumed it was his size.

“Excuse me?” her eyebrows furrowed and she twisted the pen between her fingers, the smile now gone, “Who do you think you are?”

Chuuya pretended to have overheard the snappy tone. “Chuuya Nakahara. I do think I am entitled to see Kouyou, as long as she’s not busy currently.” Not once did he break eye-contact and he watched her annoyed expression crumbling into something that looked like disbelief and then turned into something apologetic.

“I am so sorry, sir! I’ll let her know about your arrival, please, feel free to take the elevator, top floor.” As she talked she already reached for the phone, dialing a single number.

“I know, but thank you.” A last wink into her direction and he was on the way to Kouyou’s office. In the background he heard her talking, most likely to Kouyou.

Relief washed over him as soon as the elevator’s doors closed and he leaned against a wall after pushing the button to the 22th floor and shut his eyes, pulling the hat over his face to cover it. Now he could only hope that nobody who recognized him would enter.

The elevator stopped.

Too early.

“Nakahara, I figured I saw your hat out there. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

His prayers had been neglected. But he knew that voice and it wasn’t that bad.

He put on a smile before he pushed the hat back on his head again.

“It’s been a more than a year,” he replied as he watched Tachihara pushing the button just beneath the top floor and taking in a spot across Chuuya. Tachihara hadn’t changed in the slightest. He still wore the same suit, the same haircut and still carried the same black folder around everywhere, even now, pressing it firmly into his chest.
“What gives us the honor of your presence?” Tachihara asked.

“A talk with Kouyou.”

“Don’t you see her every week?”

Chuuya fought the urge to groan. It was none of his business, but of course he pried. In all honesty, Chuuya would too if he saw a long vanished acquaintance for the first time in years. And yet he would be perfectly fine without having to talk.

“We don’t talk about business at home.”

The door opened with a pling and Tachihara shot him a last skeptical glare before exiting.

The door hadn’t closed yet when he said, “Would be nice to see you around more often, you are part of this after all.”

Chuuya blinked, smile falling from his face. Was he?

“I’ll think about it.”

The door closed without any more words being exchanged, leaving Chuuya behind, baffled, but he didn’t get any time to brood over it as the door reopened to his destination. The last floor had no hallway; instead the elevator stood unminds the spacious office where light came in from all sides, the walls being replaced by windows.

Kouyou looked up from her paperwork when he entered and pushed the stack to the other side of the tidy table as he approached her. She looked every part of the boss she was.

“You haven’t shown up for one and a half year and now you walk into my office as if you belong here. What do you want?” Although she tried to maintain a blank face – her boss face – she failed to do so and a smile crept up her lips.

Chuuya flopped into the chair across her, letting the tension slip from his shoulders as he crossed his legs and pushed the hat into a more comfortable position.

“You do know me too well.”

“I raised you. How bad of a job would I have done to not recognize your ‘I-need-something-from-you’-face?”

“Still a good one?” Chuuya shrugged.

“Thank you. Now, tell me the matter.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and leaned back in her leather seat – a present from Chuuya he had made three years ago.

He paused a moment, considering the best approach on the topic, needing to convince her of both issues. One request would be easier to achieve than the other but which one to start with, he didn’t know. A finger fiddled with the hem of one glove. Ultimately he decided to just go ahead.

“I actually have two requests. For once, I would like you to hire another secretary.”

Kouyou squinted at him, “How would you know if the company needed one more?” Her jaw moved as she bit down, telling Chuuya that she had misunderstood him.

“That’s not what I mean!” he hurried to correct her and he skidded closer to the edge of the seat. In
all these years she had proven her capability of leading the company appropriately, even better than her predecessors, and he had too much respect for her to doubt the choices she made.

“I have a friend who is in need for a job, and I might have offered her a position here.”

Her eyes narrowed even more, “Great that you know what you can and can’t do, but shouldn’t you ask me first?”

“I know”, he muttered, “but she can’t stay at The Guild, and she needs that job! Please, take her in, I promise you won’t regret it.”

Kouyou held his gaze and he didn’t dare blinking, afraid to lose their silent battle of stares. She just had to agree. The Guild’s poor work conditions were well known around Portland; therefore, also to Kouyou, just nobody dared to interfere with them due to their notorious reputation for taking care of problems their own. Then, she sighed and Chuuya knew that he had won that part.

“Okay, tell her to come on Thursday. She’ll have a proper job interview, for the sake of fairness, but as long as there are no big issues I’ll take her in.”

She tapped her pen on the table – another gift from Chuuya. He still didn’t know why that damn thing cost the amount of money it did but Kouyou had liked the pink marker. “This doesn’t have to do with your new job by chance?”

Chuuya shrugged out of the jacket and dropped back into the seat, draping it over his lap.

“It might, but not as much as my second request.”

Kouyou didn’t say a word, waiting for him to speak. The old wooden watch on the table ticked in a steady rhythm but way too loudly. He was walking on dangerous territory, daring to interfere with her leadership but at the same time, he technically had every right to do so, even if he never took use of it. Additionally, he had never asked anything of her, always let her do her thing concerning the company, so a tiny favor would be in if she wanted to be fair to him.

“I need you to organize a meeting with Herman Melville, preferably a dinner invitation to the bungalow.”

“Herman Melville in like, the project manager of The Guild?”

“Uh, maybe? I don’t know, I just need to have him at the bungalow.”

She let the pen drop onto the surface, pressing her lips together as she continued to stare him down, “Why?”

The word less of a question but a statement of desperation and incomprehension, Chuuya tried to give her an encouraging smile.

“It’s for work, we need to speak to him.”

“Can’t you just invite him yourself?”

“No.” Dazai and he had talked about it but come to the conclusion that they would be walking straight into his arms and maybe even a trap as he already knew them both and obviously knew about their real occupation. They needed to separate Melville, or the demon inside him, without him suspecting anything. If Kouyou sent out an invitation, maybe under the pretext of a dinner to talk about a proposition for the company, it wouldn’t be suspicious in any way. The two companies were the most successful in the city nonetheless; a contract between them would make
sense.

While he presented the idea to her, he tried to avoid giving any information on why exactly he couldn’t do it himself and what they intended to do with Melville.

“And Fitzgerald knows the name ‘Nakahara’, under no circumstances would he decline an invitation from me, he would strive to be there personally”, Chuuya finished off his monologue.

To anyone else but him Kouyou’s face would be a blank sheet of paper, unreadable and empty, but he knew her for too long to not notice how the corners of her lips twitched as the considered the idea. She hated it.

“And how do you think this will work out?” her tone was too icy and Chuuya winced, “You know The Guild and the Port have a rough history, we don’t make deals with each other.”

“I know”, he didn’t feel as comfortable as he did before, “but then you could make it seem like a peace offering? Coming from me? It was my idea anyway.”

“You can’t possibly think that only Melville will attend then. Fitzgerald will want to attend and will bring some of his best people along.”

Chuuya groaned. “So shall it be then, I just need an opportunity to get to Melville alone without him knowing it’s me. But please help me.”

A few seconds of silence followed and Chuuya feared that the tension in the room would rip the air apart. Then, Kouyou finally closed her eyes, exhaled, and said what he needed to hear, “Okay.”

He wanted nothing more than to throw his hands up into the air in celebration, to hug her and tell her how much in her debt he was, but he didn’t get to because Kouyou hadn’t finished yet, “I can see this is important to you. I’ll invite them to a dinner at the bungalow for a peace offering under your name under one single condition.”

Of course she wouldn’t let him off the hook so easily; there was always a ‘but’. As a businesswoman she knew how to make proper deals.

“You’ll come to the grave with me on Thursday.”

Nails dug into the fabric of the chair.

“What?” Chuuya asked, but in the back of his mind he already knew what she referred to.

“Don’t take me for an idiot, Chuuya. You have refused to come along the last few years, and I have accepted it silently, but this year is the 10th anniversary. I think you owe them at least one short visit at the grave.” Her features had softened by now; however, Chuuya’s have frozen. He bit the inside of his lower lip, words he shouldn’t say already on the tip of his tongue which got replaced by a compromise.

“They are already dead, they won’t know.” He couldn’t hold back the bite in his words.

A flash of something usually deeply hidden crossed over Kouyou’s expression, but it vanished before anyone could capture it.

“Chuuya, please. If not for them, do it for yourself. And if you don’t even want that, then think of it as a favor for me. Accompany me.”
Kouyou never pleaded. She asked, commanded or advised. But she never pleaded. It was what
made Chuuya suck in air through his teeth and run a hand over his face. He didn’t want to go there,
he never had and he never will.

He never had been raised religiously, not by his parents and not by Kouyou, who never pushed her
own morals upon him and it might be the reason he didn’t have a thing for religion and ceremonies
and traditions. In all actuality, he tried to keep distance to these things, other than Kouyou, who did
hold onto at least some traditions and while not a lot, she followed them diligently, the annual visit
to the grave being one of them. She had never dragged him along, but this one seemed important to
her, and she had just agreed to help him. He could go there, just this time.

Slumping in the seat, he nodded slowly, not meeting her eyes, “Okay, I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

Chuuya looked up, directly at Kouyou smiling at him, carrying a trace of pride in her features. He
could do this.

“I will send out the invitations today. Will it be just you?” Quickly her tone changed back to her
business voice and back to normal.

Chuuya shook his head, “No, Dazai will be there too.”

“Then I will address him as a business partner of yours if it’s alright.”

“That’s exactly what he is, just don’t mention his name,” Chuuya grinned, already relaxing again.

“If there’s anything else, I will call you. Now, see your ass out, I have a meeting in ten minutes.”

Chuuya laughed, along with Kouyou, as he got up and dramatically bowed in front of her, hand
across his chest and even lifting his hat from his head.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” he said, before heading for the exit.

“Oh, just leave,” Kouyou chuckled, “and have fun ghost-hunting.”

Chuuya stopped in his tracks, turning on his heels, mouth agape in shock, which made Kouyou
laugh even more.

“Your Dazai might be good at staying away from social media, but your clients just love talking
about your magnificent work”, she wiggled her eyebrows as she talked, having brushed off her
business-persona for a second to mock him.

Throwing his head back in frustration, Chuuya shut his eyes, “You really must think I have gone
mad.”

“To be honest, I don’t even wonder anymore. You do whatever you want as long as you like it and
stop doing that illegal stuff. That’s all I want.” The love her voice conveyed was almost too much
for Chuuya to take.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Not saying anything else, she just smiled at him and gestured to the door with a hand, before her
attention was on the papers again, and Chuuya didn’t miss a beat to get out of her office.
Chuuya hated this place with a burning passion. He wished he hadn’t let Kouyou convince him to come along.

Today every entity had to conspire against him, as it poured relentlessly and not even the umbrella managed to keep his black clothes dry. It would have made no difference if he had left it at home, but now he had it with him, so he could as well use it. He felt mocked by the universe.

He walked next to Kouyou in silence, who wore a dress he had lastly seen at the funeral and whose shoes sunk into the wet grass and sludgy ground and he hated that dress just for what it stood for. The paved ways left behind, they walked on narrow beaten paths, past all those grey tombstones made out of stone or marble, sizes ranging from tiny to entire monuments, depending on the wealth of the people, as if the deceased still cared what kind of rock decorated their grave. Some of them looked long abandoned, green goo already covering the edges, if they were still there, while others were surrounded by maybe one, maybe more bouquets, of which some had wilted.

His hand dug deeper into his pocket with every step closer to their destination and he tried to keep his eyes glued to the ground at some point, not wanting to see any more of the cemetery and watching how his shoes covered in mud. The wind disheveled his hair and he had to brush some strands out of his face along with a tear, the coldness making his eyes water.

From the corner of his vision he noticed how Kouyou gave him a worried look but he refused to meet her stare. He was alright. Today was just another day, he just had to get this visit done and then he could move on with his regular schedule – no big deal.

Somebody walked past them – he didn’t see them, only their feet and he heard their steps on the wet grass. Kouyou mumbled a brief greeting but Chuuya walked ahead, not seeing a reason in making contact with people who were only here to grieve in the rain and which he would never see again. His parents would have scolded him for not being polite.

“Chuuya, we have to turn left”, the soft spoken words were barely loud enough to be heard over the wind and the rain but Chuuya quickly stopped to change directions, having missed the last turning as he had been too focused on the path in front of him.

He wouldn’t admit that in all reality he didn’t remember the way to the grave anymore.

Jogging up behind Kouyou, he dared to take in the back of the cemetery where more trees covered the area and bushes separated the larger gravestones from each other and a twisting feeling in his stomach told him that they were close.

A vague image of a double grave with a serpentine top, made out of limestone, popped into his mind, a split second before he actually made out the piece of stone in front of him but with weathering traces. It was nothing Chuuya would have chosen, but back then, he hadn’t really any say in those matters and in hindsight he was glad about it. While the style didn’t reflect his own ideas, he appreciated how simple and small it was kept. Kouyou had known that they wouldn’t have liked it pretentious.

But how would they know, they wouldn’t see it anyway. It could have been a five feet memorial and they wouldn’t know nor care.

There they stood. Two figures, clad in black, one with an umbrella in his hands, the other with a
bouquet made of white flowers, in front of a cultivated tombstone, on the grave of Chuuya’s parents who had died exactly ten years ago.

Chuuya would have given everything to forget that unholy day and it had almost worked. He hadn’t spent a thought on it for months, if not years. But as he stood in front of the stone memories began pushing against the wall he had worked so hard on building up and fragment after fragment seeped through the cracks that had remained unclosed.

Chuuya didn’t want any of them; not the happy ones, not the ugly ones, not the ones where they were together, not the one where he had seen them last.

“The day they told me, I would achieve great things in the future, is the one that stuck with me.”

Chuuya’s eyes refocused when Kouyou whispered into the air, pushed some of the memories into the back of his mind again. It wasn’t directed at him specifically - but somehow it was. Kouyou clutched the flowers firmly enough for her knuckles to stick out white and Chuuya heard some stalks break. When he looked at her, his stomach dropped. He wasn’t used to seeing her, the toughest and most badass woman he knew, losing composure.

Her lower lip trembled and a watery glint in her eyes appeared. Ever since he knew Kouyou, he had seen her cry twice; the first time at the funeral, the second time when he had ended up in hospital with three broken ribs and laid in a coma for three days.

His own, already flat, breathing hollowed even more as tightness clamped his chest. Kouyou had always been there for him, ever since the day, no matter how stupid the issue. This time, she needed him.

It took a lot to make her cry. Today she was allowed to. Chuuya stretched out his arms and Kouyou immediately accepted the invitation, holding onto him tightly, clinging to his shirt and letting the tears flow. She cried silently, her body shaking with every breath and the fabric on Chuuya’s shoulders wetted. With a hand he stroked up and down her back, feeling the unwanted burn building up behind his eyes. Taking deep breaths he tried to suppress it but it turned out to be more difficult than he hoped it would be.

“It’s alright. They had so much fate in you, they had from the beginning. You were the daughter they never had”, he spoke under his breath, fighting against the stagnating rhythm his breathing had become.

A sob shuddered through Kouyou, the words reaching right where they should – or shouldn’t.

“And yet this isn’t how they wanted it to be. I took your place, Chuuya. It has always been yours, and I still feel bad for taking it from you”, she muttered into his shirt, not loosening the embrace.

Chuuya dropped the umbrella, it now lying uselessly on the ground so he could hold Kouyou closer. His eyes shut as the rain engulfed them.

“I never wanted it and I think they always knew I wouldn’t take it. Giving it into your hands was the best decision I’ve ever made and look how far you’ve come. Look how far we’ve both come. It’s maybe not what my parents had envisioned but in the end, it was for the best.”

“Did you ever regret it?”

Chuuya would have almost missed what she said hadn’t he felt her speaking against his shoulder.

“Not a second.”
Silence settled once again, both haunted by the voices inside their heads which brought old, maybe long forgotten, memories to the surface for the first time in years.

Chuuya bit his inner lip. A picture of him and his father on his birthday had manifested and he had begun trembling. He wouldn’t let the emotions overflow, not now, not yet. He wouldn’t fall apart. He needed to hold her up.

“They would be so proud of you”, Kouyou mumbled.

“They would be so proud of us”, Chuuya replied.

He didn’t know how true that was on his account when all the things he had done in his short life came to his mind, but he was sure they would be proud of Kouyou, who they had loved despite having no blood relation and who they have never treated with anything else but respect and kindness, just as they had done with him.

She gave him a last squeeze before letting go of him. Her eyes, now puffy and red, were clouded with sadness but the smile on her lips was genuine.

She gently brushed over Chuuya’s wet hair, tucking a strand behind his ear, something akin to pride in her expression, before she put down the bouquet in front of the tombstone.

Below the names and their birth and death names, the inscription in arched letters stood out.

“In any case, a completely invincible hero just isn’t good story material.”

A quote his father had used to live by.

He heard Kouyou’s feet shuffle but didn’t look up when she stood behind him, eyes still on the grave.

“Do you need some time alone?”

He didn’t know if he needed it or wanted it.

“I am fine, you can go home. I will call you later”, is what he said.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

A last pat on his shoulder, a final squeeze, and she was gone and Chuuya was left alone.

The water formed drops on the tips of his hair and he was soaked to the skin, it even dripped down his bare back, but he didn’t feel the rain or the cold anymore, his body shuddered for a different reason. All he felt was the throbbing headache building up and the sting in his chest he could no longer ignore.

He had avoided this place for so long and had never intended to come back, which made being here even worse. Everything that had been shut out for so long pushed and pulled at his self-control and he wished he could just lock it up again. He failed.

They had big visions for him, a bright future laid out on a red carpet in front of him.

Sorry.
Sorry for being a disappointment to the family.

But he did it for the best.

He wanted to leave. He needed to leave.

Chuuya turned on his heels, not casting a look back as he hurried down the path to the exit.

Water ran down his cheeks. He didn’t know if it was the rain or a tear.

An endless stretch of paths and meadow in front of him he ran, putting distance between him and the stone and when he thought he had gotten lost the metal gate finally appeared. His heart beat rapidly, his lungs burnt as if they had been pierced by a knife and he had trouble calming down under the roof of the small chapel, the umbrella forgotten at the grave. The exhaustion did little to distract him from the pain his heart. He gasped for air, but it came out as a sob, originating from deep inside his guts.

He wouldn’t allow himself to cry, it was against everything he stood for, but holding back the tears got more and more difficult with every second.

Why had he told Kouyou to leave him?

This was too much to bear alone.

But he couldn’t push his own mess on her when she herself struggled. And yet he needed somebody.

Hectic fingers pulled his phone out of the pocket and scrolled aimlessly through the contacts, when they stopped over a name he had gotten so familiar with over the past weeks. Not fully able to register the action, he only hesitated for a split second before pressing the call button.

The ring tone sounded once, twice.

A third time.

He should have known, he doesn’t call, only ever texts.

A fourth time.

And then somebody picked up.

“Chuuya?”

Chuuya exhaled a trembling breath but one of relief.

“Hello?” the voice echoed through the speaker, “Chuuya, are you alright?”

“Oi, yes, I think I am.”

“You don’t sound like it. Where are you? Do you need help?” Dazai’s tone instantly filled with worry. Did he really sound so bad?

“No, it’s fine. I am at the cemetery, and I don’t need help. I think I just need company.”

Dazai didn’t say anything. Had Chuuya said something wrong? This had been a bad idea.
“How about food?”

A small laugh escaped him, the question so simple and yet to considerate coming from Dazai.

“Sound good. Where?”

“Oyster Bar, you know where?”

“Yes, I know it. I can be there in thirty.” The restaurant close to his home, he could even get changed before meeting with Dazai.

“Alright, see you soon.”

They hung up and somehow, the day didn’t seem as dark anymore.

Chuuya was there in 35 and Dazai already waiting for him, waving him closer when he noticed his partner.

“Your hair is still wet,” was the first thing he said when Chuuya pulled back the chair to sit down at the table.

“Didn’t have enough time to blow dry it”, he had come home to see that he still dripped but he did intend to be on time, so he barely managed to change his clothes and to pull his hair in a ponytail. Being sure that he didn’t look absolutely unsightly, he had dared to set foot outside again, but nothing escaped Dazai’s notice.

“And you look exhausted, and not in a good way.”

The waiter stalked over to bring them a menu and to take their orders for drinks. Red wine tempted Chuuya more than ever but he thought of a better and went with simple water. Disquieted eyes watched him reading through the card, and Chuuya intended to ignore them but the scrutinizing stare made his skin prickle until he couldn’t help but snap at him.

“What’s wrong?”

Dazai uncrossed his legs to lean closer to Chuuya. He didn’t back up.

“You never call me, literally never. And there you ring me up, but not even for something job related but because you want my company?”

“If you don’t want to be here, you can leave, I don’t force you to stay,” Chuuya bit out behind gritted teeth. They have never done this – meeting out of context of work – except for the one time in the bar and still it had to do with work. Maybe they weren’t meant to have contact like friends, maybe he shouldn’t mix free time with work, maybe the reason they hadn’t done so yet was because Dazai didn’t want to see him more than needed.

Calling Dazai had felt so right.

“Oh no, don’t get me wrong,” taken aback, Dazai flinched and Chuuya swore he saw a shadow flashing through his eyes, “I really enjoy spending time with you. But you worry me. I can see something’s troubling you. I am offering you a chance to talk about it.”

Oh. Chuuya hadn’t expected him to actually worry, but thinking about it he should have known; Dazai had always worried about him when he had been on his knees and he considered Dazai’s offer. For years he had kept quiet about what he used to call the Day whenever he was forced to
mention it, acting as if it had never happened and that his life played out exactly as he had imagined. The truth looked exactly the opposite.

He liked to lock up the memories, keeping them as far away from reality as possible – it helped him accepting it. Today, his strategy had failed and the unpleasant buzzing pictures remained close to the front. Maybe time had come to tell.

He slammed the menu shut and sighed – better to get this over and done with.

“Today it’s been ten years since my parents died.”

Dazai’s eyes twitched, but he remained silent, letting Chuuya continue, who thanked him internally for not instantly apologizing or any of that crap.

“There were kidnapped, bribed, and then killed. The police never found out who did it, but it is rumored that Fitzgerald had fingers in the pie, having been on the warp with my parent’s company, but I guess I will never know.”

Dazai asking questions didn’t surprise him, but the question he had did.

“And yet you have organized a meeting with Fitzgerald just for our case. Why?”

A good question. Why exactly had he?

“Innocent until proven guilty, isn’t it? I also think saving the city from a demon is more important than an old family feud I was never part of.”

An affirming hum left Dazai’s lips, who seemed to mull over the next question.

“Will you tell me how exactly you managed to get him to the bungalow, as you call it?”

“Kouyou offered them a peace treaty on my accord.”

“I think I am missing out on something.”

Chuuya needed a second to grasp that Dazai had no idea who Kouyou was, having never mentioned her in one of their conversations before and while her name happened to be well known in the business, one who had nothing to do with it wouldn’t have heard of it.

“Kouyou is the former HR and current CEO of PREP - you know, the real estate company?” Chuuya gesticulated with his hands, “It belonged to my parents previously. She’s the one that should take over the company until I turned twenty. She’s also the person who cared for me after they died and is my closest friend.”

Watching those brown eyes narrow, Chuuya already guessed the question to come before Dazai said it out loud.

“But you are twenty two and working with me instead of sitting in that office. Why?”

The waiter came back with their drinks and asked them for their orders. While Dazai didn’t hesitate, knowing exactly what he wanted, Chuuya opened his mouth just to close it again. He had gone through the menu but hadn’t decided on anything and couldn’t remember a single dish, having been too distracted by Dazai’s stare. The definition of clueless must have been written all over his face as a smile stretched over Dazai’s and then he ordered a second dish. With a wave of his hand he gestured Chuuya to continue, who let out a suppressed laugh, the answer the simplest
words that he told the entire day.

“Because I never wanted the company. Could you imagine me, sitting in an office, every day, for the rest of my life?”

Dazai tilted his head to the side, then pursed his lips as if to say ‘hell no’.

“Exactly. I did a lot of things, got myself in a lot of trouble, and in police custody more than I can count,” he snorted, “and although I got prepared to lead a company like that, I rejected it when Kouyou said it was time. Instead, I told her to keep it. She made it so much bigger and more successful than I ever could have. I know I would have ruined the imperium they’d built.”

His tongue grew heavy, the guilt Kouyou felt and had revealed to him today a considerable weight on him. Dazai nodded in understanding, when Chuuya felt something cold slide on his gloved hands and his eyes flicked down to see Dazai’s hand on his own. He didn’t pull it back, finding comfort in the action but simultaneously, his heart-rate picked up, wherefore he almost overheard the next question.

“And you simply asked Kouyou to do you a favor?”

“Let’s say so, but I still have a card in my sleeve. On paper, the company still belongs to me, I just don’t associate with it. But invested people still remember the name ‘Nakahara’. Fitzgerald for sure does and he would sell his soul just to talk to me, having tried over and over again.”

Even though he probably should, he felt no anger towards Fitzgerald, despite the rumors. With passing years, Chuuya had learnt that hatred required too much energy to be worthwhile, especially when not knowing if it’s warranted. The energy should rather be invested into much more pleasurable things.

Dazai licked his lips; “Making a guess: That’s why you never take any money, you already got enough.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Never said that. But one more thing: We want Melville, not Fitzgerald. How do we get rid of him.”

Chuuya had already filled him in about the dinner and the guests that were to come. Little did Dazai know; Chuuya had already thought about the issue and come up with an acceptable solution.

“I had intended to cancel the dinner for everybody except Melville, but Kouyou advised me against it. So we probably will have to sit it out and when they all leave make Melville stay behind.”

Their food was brought to their table and Dazai’s hand slid away from his. He immediately missed the touch. The plate set down in front of him included a mixture of different seafood and looked fairly appetizing. At the questioning glare he gave Dazai, he merely offered a confident grin before turning his attention to the crab in front of him.

However, the silence didn’t last long, because after a bite, Dazai set down the cutlery, making Chuuya look up and directly into those big brown eyes which caused Chuuya’s brain-cells to melt away for a moment.

“Thank you, for telling me.”

“Thank you for listening,” Chuuya replied. Talking about it usually felt like a burden, but right
now, he felt lighter than he had in a long time. It had been long time due.

There were two things he always feared when the subject got brought up; being pitied and being judged. Dazai did none of those but instead listened with curiosity and understanding. Calling him had been the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
I also wanted to mention that you may stay tuned for Sunday, as I will upload a (very) early 'christmas surprise'. It's actually an one-shot I've finished this week and (! spoiler !) it's smutty. I apologize if that's not your cup of tea, but for everyone who likes to read that; Sunday's the day.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hello again,
I've only now realized how far into the story we already are. Time flies by and yet the worst is still ahead of them ... poor boys.
Now, be prepared for their first real fight. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he heard ‘bungalow’, an image of an old, little shack popped into his mind. Despite being well aware that Chuuya wouldn’t invite high-class guests into a shabby cabin, he hadn’t been able to shake that picture, which explained why Dazai was now staring at the ground-level residence in admiration. The building couldn’t have been more than a decade old, everything too modern and high-tech to be older, and didn’t fit into the scenery at all as it was surrounded by trees and fields. What a shame it wouldn’t stand much longer.

It had taken him two seconds to notice the fingerprint-sensor at the front door, which was missing any other kind of lock at the first look as the key hole was only noticeable when you got closer, hidden under a little flap.

No decorations were placed in the yarn or on the porch and along with the clean look of the house itself, it gave of an empty atmosphere, which would have been commensurate, wouldn’t it have been for the light inside. Chuuya had told him in the early afternoon that he had already arrived there, making Dazai feeling guilty for not helping him with preparations. But Chuuya had woefully declined any assistance.

Therefore, Dazai decided to make up for it with the most exquisite wine he could get on such a short notice. As he pushed down the doorbell an hour before the other guests would arrive, his fingers wrapped tightly around the bottle’s neck. It didn't take long for footsteps to be heard inside and for Chuuya to open the door.

Dazai wished he wouldn’t have been so surprised by his partner’s appearance. It weren’t the fine clothes that rendered him speechless, although they made Chuuya even more attractive than usual, but the purple apron tied around his middle. Standing there, holding the door open, he looked like a very pretty housewife. Dazai smiled at the thought.

“Are you going to come in? I can’t risk the vegetables to burn.”

Ripped out of his thoughts, Dazai stepped into the house and handed Chuuya the bottle, who instantly mustered the etiquette, the red liquid swashing inside.

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

“Found it downtown. I didn’t know what you prefer, but I hope it’s fine.”

In all honesty, his knowledge on wine kept within limit, but he trusted the sommelier to make a wise choice and judging by Chuuya’s excited expression, he had made an excellent choice.
“It’s actually one of my favorites,” Chuuya trailed the font on the front with his thumb and Dazai escaped a silent sigh of relief. Lucky him.

“A little thank-you for making this possible. I hope we can open it after a successful case”, Dazai said. Chuuya returned the smile, a joyful sparkle in his eyes, “I am sure we will.”

It smelled savory in the open kitchen, despite the open window-doors in the dining room. Not even the fresh breeze could cover the scent of food. The large table had already been set and small snacks were provided, prepared with an astonishing amount of details and finger work, being shaped like flowers.

Something sizzled in the frying pan on the stove, where already something simmered in a pot, and occupied Chuuya’s full attention, probably the vegetables but Dazai didn’t dare coming closer, afraid of getting grease stains on his suit.

“I didn’t think you would cook”, Dazai eventually said, after he had jumped on the cooking island and watched him doing his magic in silence for a few minutes.

“We organized a dinner. What do you think we should eat? The furniture?” Chuuya didn’t look up from the pan and Dazai scrunched up his nose, seeing no need in snarky remarks when he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Of course not, but I assumed you would order some fancy menu from a restaurant. Isn’t that what people usually do?”

Turning around to face Dazai, Chuuya pointed the cooking spoon in his direction, an eyebrow raised in a scolding manner, “Do I look like I want to spend money on a hyper fancy dinner that will satisfy nobody, even if one person ate it all?”

Dazai instinctively leaned back to get away from the spoon as far as possible. “Eh-“

“No, I don’t and I am confident I can do at least as good if not even better.”

Dazai wasn’t convinced. “But you are no chef –“

“Watch me and don’t you dare complaining before you haven’t tasted,” he put a lid over the pan just a little too forcefully and turned down the heat, then he untied the apron and tossed it into a corner. Dazai wouldn’t admit that he was a little sad about it.

Scrutinizing eyes trailed up and down Dazai’s appearance, until one corner of his lips pulled up disapprovingly, which Dazai didn’t fully understand. When getting dressed, he had been extra careful to look as formal as he could manage, even pulled out his best suit from the dusty corner of his wardrobe. He had been sure to be clad appropriately for tonight.

“Anything wrong?” Dazai asked, lips pursed.

“You look too formal.” was all the answer he got and Dazai’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, analyzing Chuuya’s outfit, which he hadn’t paid too much attention to until now; he wore a gray vest, white dress shirt, with rolled up sleeves. Dazai had ascribed it to the fact that he had been cooking and didn’t want to dirty the suit, but with the apron gone now, he laid eyes on black leather straps across his chest. He called this fashionable? But it went well with the black chocker.

Letting out a huff, Dazai rested his elbows on his knees. “We are meeting with a bunch of business-people, what else am I supposed to look like?”
Chuuya rolled his eyes as he approached him, “Yes, but it’s supposed a peace-offering, not a dinner to form a deal. “ An ungloved hand reached out for Dazai’s tie. Had his hands always been this delicate? “They won’t expect you to look this put together.”

Skilled fingers quickly worked on the tie and Dazai let him, watching his concentrated face, which only reached up to his own chest, him sitting too high on the counter. Something differed today, but he couldn’t pin it down.

The piece of fabric got pulled away from his neck, but Dazai didn’t get to move yet as the fingers continued to fumble with the upper button of his shirt before patting lightly over his chest.

“So, now you are good to go.”

Dazai saw his rosy lips pulling up into a smile, blue eyes watching him from underneath long, black lashes. It wouldn’t have taken much to just reach for his chin and tilt his head upwards - and then it dawned on him.

“Is Chuuya wearing make-up?”

With a hurried step backwards Chuuya brought distance between them, wide eyes looking at him in a mixture of anger and shock, before his features softened and he sighed: “Is it too noticeable?”

He made no attempt denying it, to Dazai’s surprise.

“Actually no, but I see you too often to not notice,” Dazai said, which came closest to the truth. If you didn’t encounter Chuuya frequently, you wouldn’t even suspect anything, faint traces of color here and there only accentuated his eyes, cheekbones and lips. Nobody would deny that Chuuya was beautiful – and prettiness raised sympathy. Something both of them were painfully aware of and for once, Dazai wished he wasn’t.

“But it looks pretty. Everyone in the room would fall for you.”

Dazai couldn’t help the smirk playing on the lips when Chuuya quickly avoided his eyes, cheeks a little bit pinker now.

Dazai could have spent the entire night just watching him talk and move around the kitchen, pretending the danger ceased to exist and that they considered this their ‘normal’. But life never made it this easy for him.

Chuuya had leaned against the kitchen counter, hair tucked behind his ears and arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Do you remember what we agreed on?” Chuuya asked, requesting attention.

“Of course I do, we made the plan together.”

“Repeat it.”

The lazy smile Dazai offered did nothing to change Chuuya’s demanding nature and Dazai complied, if reluctantly.

“I am your personal consultant and have been for years; therefore I am to participate in this dinner. I shouldn’t make any inappropriate jokes but I only strive to please the guests. I –“

Chuuya scrunched up his nose, “Don’t talk like you are about to prostitute yourself.”
Dazai ignored his comment but had to suppress a smile, “I shouldn’t make any indicating
comments and mostly, I shall not fuck it up.”

“Exactly, because if we get on Fitzgerald’s bad side, Kouyou will rip my head off, and neither of
us want that”, as he nodded in approval, Chuuya’s shoulders loosened up a little.

“And in the end we separate Melville and perform the exorcism.” The word bitter on Dazai’s
tongue, he tried to remind himself that it had to be done. Maybe he should call it differently, just to
avoid the unpleasant aftertaste it had, yet it reminded him of the little preparations he had made
earlier, the additional weight already forgotten.

Dazai reached into his jacket and pulled out three knives he had brought with him. While they were
similar to the one’s they had used in the training, similarly large and soaked with e.m.e., they
weighted slightly more and Dazai had made sure to sharpen them in advance. He handed them over
to Chuuya.

Dazai watched him twisting them in his hands, getting used to the weight and he had to admit that
they suited Chuuya.

“I thought you used a revolver?” Chuuya didn’t look up from the blades but the smile crept up
Dazai’s lips nevertheless.

“I do. Those are for you. Just in case you might need them. “

Then he slid a hand behind his back, where a holster was attached to his pants, containing the dear
weapon and yet hidden from sight, leaving no imprint on the suit, no matter how he moved.

Pulling it out, his hands closed around the cold metal and his thumb traced the golden inscription
on the grip. It had been a long time since it had been put to use.

From the corner of his eyes he noticed Chuuya watching him, but he didn’t pay any attention to it
until Chuuya asked, “How do you know I am more skilled with knives?”

“You said so in the bar.”

“I told Gin, you’ve heard that?”

Shaking his head in amusement, Dazai chuckled, “I would never miss out such an important detail
about the person I am supposed to trust my life with.”

Throwing knives could be a useful skill – but equally dangerous.

Chuuya’s mouth opened just to close again without a word said, before unbuttoning the vest.
Dazai’s eyebrows rose when he saw the stack of daggers Chuuya had stored on the inside, pulling
three of them out to replace them with Dazai’s special knives. Apparently Chuuya had prepared as
well, although the without extra-mundane energy they wouldn’t have caused severe damage to the
demon.

The gun again in the holster, Dazai clasped his hands together, getting Chuuya’s attention. “Is there
anything else to be done? Can I help you with anything?”

Chuuya had obviously spent a lot of time preparing this event, the risk of it clearly in the back of
his mind, and Dazai had done exactly nothing. He would have, if Chuuya had allowed him to, but
even now Chuuya shook his head.
“I have already prepared everything because I can’t allow myself to spend any time in the kitchen later. The only thing to be done is to pour in the alcohol when the guests arrive.”

“So you really did everything by yourself, even those things on the table?” Dazai pointed a finger at the flowers, and Chuuya nodded.

“It’s called amuse-gueules.”

“How long did it take you?”

Thinking, Chuuya cast a look at the clock behind him, “Everything? I’ve been here since around eleven? I don’t exactly know.”

“You spent the entire day here, just cooking?” He hadn’t expected that much engagement from Chuuya but he probably should have. He had made clear how perfect everything had to be, not caring about what happened with Melville until later, as long as Fitzgerald had a blast.

The sound of the doorbell echoed through the entire bungalow and Dazai slid down from the island while Chuuya straightened his sleeves and adjusted the cufflinks. They shared a glance, both unsure about what it meant, then Dazai followed Chuuya to welcome the guests.

Standing behind Chuuya and looking over his shoulder, he didn’t miss how his back stiffened.

Chuuya had told him that Fitzgerald would bring at least two people, Melville and Alcott, his secretary, and while they were surely present, another person had joined – a red haired guy.

Slender fingers put slight pressure on Chuuya’s back and to Dazai’s relief it worked as Chuuya politely extended a hand to the Guild’s CEO.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you at last, Chuuya Nakahara.” The words dripped with friendliness and every idiot could have noticed the insincerity but Fitzgerald sucked up the sugar-water with eagerness. Dazai’s smile not better in any way, he stepped back to let them in.

“The pleasure is mine! Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and these are my most devoted coworkers.”

The first word Dazai would describe Fitzgerald with happened to be slimy, and while not completely dishonest, his words merely intended to please.

When the arm with the gigantic Rolex got extended into his direction he accepted it with an even wider smile.

“Dazai Osamu, Chuuya’s personal consultant. We’ve been working together for years; we hope to have organized an enjoyable dinner for us all.” He had gotten the sentence ready hours ago and it seemed to please Fitzgerald, because he nodded approvingly, not suspecting anything. And if he did, he didn’t let it show.

They greeted each one after another, but neither the secretary Louisa Alcott nor the financial manager Mark Twain tweaked any interest in him, nothing special about them to be noted.

Melville entered last, shaking Chuuya’s hand, “We’ve seen each other before, haven’t we?”

For a moment Dazai almost believed him. If Melville didn’t recognize any of them, then their job would turn out simpler than anticipated, the moment of surprise on their side.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so,” Chuuya smiled but when Melville faced Dazai, he knew it was
nothing but an act. The grin made his blood run cold, but the eyes caused his heartbeat to pick up. His hands felt as if they were about to freeze off.

His expression wasn’t human anymore; he recognized every detail of the demonic influence, having seen it more than once in his life time; eyes clouded with red, ever so subtly. With a blink of an eye, a mask lay on top of the face, perfectly human again, and the old man almost purred his introduction. A shiver ran down Dazai’s spine.

“Herman Melville, nice to meet you, Osamu.”

Chuuya stepped on his foot, pulling him out of his mind, then nudged him gently in the direction of the dining area.

“Take a seat, talk with them, ask about their arrival, whatever. I’ll be here in a few”, Chuuya whispered.

“I know how to entertain people,” Dazai replied, more bite behind the words than intended. He wasn’t mad at Chuuya for giving him directions, whose nervousness showed in the rushed way he moved. Today he would leave Chuuya the reins, the risks higher for him than for Dazai.

Dazai’s didn’t even know if he had heard him, being gone too fast. Therefore, he took seat next to the head of the table, next to Alcott, across from Melville, who didn’t as much as look at him.

Better so.

As Fitzgerald looked from left to right, taking in his surroundings and raising an eyebrow in approval, his secretary didn’t happen to be half as comfortable as her boss. Dazai felt a little sorry for her. She probably didn’t want to be part of this, and Dazai could understand. Not everybody was made for the harsh business-world.

“Did you find your way around here quickly? It is quite hidden from the city after all,” Dazai begun talking, doing exactly as he had been ordered to.

Twain, who had already helped himself with the appetizers on the table, spoke up first, “I don’t know how the others did, but I got the way wrong trice. I don’t know if my GPS was off, but I got here in time, and that’s what counts. It’s a nice area tho.” He shoved another piece of bread into his mouth and Dazai found it amusing how little Twain cared about formalities, this reflecting in his attire. Chuuya had been right, he had in fact been overdressed upon comparison to Twain’s jeans.

Fitzgerald had now taken upon inspecting the food on the table, eyeing it from every side before tasting and approving of it with a hum. Apparently he had an irrational need to approve of everything – how annoying.

“Louisa and I found our way just fine without any troubles. But I have to agree, you wouldn’t find it if you didn’t know where to look. Have you also been alright, Herman?”

But the project manager didn’t get a say, as Chuuya came in with a bottle of champagne and judging by the look of the bottle a fairly expensive one, which Fitzgerald immediately commented on.

He went round the table, pouring in for everybody, before taking place at the head of the table, across from Fitzgerald, and raised his glass.

“Thank you for accepting the invitation. This means a lot to PREP as well as to me personally. I hope for an enjoyable evening and that it can be seen as a fresh start between our two companies.”
Right there, Dazai understood that Chuuya had a side he hadn’t gotten to know yet – his business self, the boy that had been trained to take over a billion-dollar company. When listening to him, speaking in that particular voice, you gained respect for the well-spoken man.

However, Chuuya belonged there as little as he did.

Glasses clinked together; the liquid ran down Dazai’s throat like honey.

“The gratitude is on me,” Fitzgerald’s voice filled the room, “It’s a real shame that our companies got so distant over time. I hope we can change that in the future and look forward to some great projects.”

Chuuya nodded, sipping the champagne and listening to what Fitzgerald had to say. Dazai didn’t feel obligated to pay attention, nothing of this being his deal, and allowed himself to disconnect from the conversation while trying to maintain an attentive expression. He had no idea about business; he wouldn’t be able to contribute anything useful. His thoughts and gaze wandered to Melville, whose stare switched back and forth between Chuuya and Fitzgerald, as they went on about great achievements both had made in the past few years. Apparently Chuuya knew more about the company than he cared to admit.

If it hadn’t been for the instance earlier, Dazai would have believed that Asmodeus remained dormant, lingering deep inside the man, but he had already revealed how close to the surface he was. Hopefully Melville still possessed any kind of consciousness, or no holy being would be able to save him.

It turned out to be a great benefit that Melville had arrived in his own car. It wouldn’t be too suspicious if he left a little later than the others – or didn’t leave at all in the worst case. He really hoped they would be able to save him, but Dazai’s men were ready for every scenario. Some acquaintances of his had agreed to help out, or at least to be as much of a help they could be being dead. The rest would be left for Chuuya and him.

“If you would excuse me, I am going to prepare the first meal.”

The chair screeched on the wooden floor and suddenly Dazai found himself alone again with the Guild members. He quickly snapped back to consciousness, knowing Fitzgerald wouldn’t leave him off the hook, being a stranger in their most inner circle.

“So, Dazai, how long have you been working with Nakahara?” Fitzgerald pierced him down, as if intending to pick him apart with every word; he could try, Dazai had already seen through him. “A little over two years. We started working together shortly before he received the company.”

Chuuya had predicted Fitzgerald’s interest, wherefore they had prepared the perfect story, and the lie flowed from Dazai’s lips with ease, telling it so that Chuuya didn’t have to.

“How does it come that there is so little to know about you, or Nakahara? I haven’t heard about him for years and suddenly there’s an invitation. Don’t get me wrong, I really appreciate the gesture, but still I am curious.”

Not having excepted the inevitable question to arise this soon, Dazai’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second, before a sly smirk played on his lips.

“Because nothing is more intelligent than leaving work to the most competent people you have, especially if they have a special talent for their job, which is the case with CEO Kouyou. Additionally, she has been PREP’s face for years. A sudden change wouldn’t leave a good
Neither of them broke eye-contact, a silent request for information and a denial of that going back and forth until Chuuya served the first bowls of soup. Dazai couldn’t shake the feeling that Fitzgerald was after something, but he couldn’t grasp what.

The conversations that followed through the first and the second dish, however, dealt with minor business issues and more or less funny anecdotes of coworkers and interns. Especially Mark had a talent for retelling stories, drawing a genuine laugh from Dazai, which died the instant Melville looked at him.

A cold wave rushed through his hands and he balled them to fists under the table, hoping nobody had seen the blue light. Melville only grinned. It happened every time he faced Dazai and with passing minutes Dazai wished for the evening to be over more and more. At some point the demon must have noticed how affected he was as the demonic energy gradually increased, surely on purpose, and when they were eating the main course, Dazai struggled to hold back his ability.

A sudden burst of energy flooded the room and the fork fell into the Yakitori with a chink as he pulled his hand under the table.

An apology murmured, he still didn’t dare to raise his hands again. Of course this had to happen in Asmodeus presence, how hadn’t he thought of it? He should have known better.

The conversation continued, when a warm hand placed on top of his, a faint red glow around it, and the coldness retreated. A silent sigh escaped him as warmth filled his entire body and he cast a quick glance at Chuuya who did his best to keep their guests attention on his face and free hand that gesticulated wildly. A gentle squeeze around Dazai’s hands, then his hand was gone, gesticulating again, but the cozy feeling remained and Dazai smiled to himself.

The evening went on smoothly, and Dazai claimed it to be a successful event as even the secretary warmed up after a while, telling stories of her own. Fitzgerald seemed to be the only one who wanted to use the opportunity to talk about company details, as the others always intended to turn the talk around.

The food had been more than enjoyable; he had to give it to Chuuya, he was a talented cook. Dazai had never eaten better in his entire life – not that he cared a lot about food though.

Next to him, Chuuya still kept up the act of the business man, but he had loosed up, moving more freely and if it hadn’t been for the nasty sting in his hands, Dazai would have even forgotten the actual reason for the dinner.

Melville had stayed conspicuously silent the last hour, being a spectator to the scene.

As the evening came to an end and everybody munched their Japanese pancakes, Dazai wanted to believe that nothing could go wrong anymore, until Fitzgerald opened his mouth once more.

“Chuuya, I hope the question is not too personal, but it had come to my ears that this week the tenth death anniversary of your parents had rolled by. My sincere condolence. But after ten years you still haven’t shown yourself in the business world. I was wondering… do you even want that burden, or don’t you think it would be better in someone else’s hands?”

His coworkers flinched, averted their eyes. They had known.

Chuuya immediately stopped chewing, the spoon with sorbet on it slowly sinking onto the plate. That’s what Fitzgerald had been after the whole evening.
“If you already assume a subject to be too personal, then it might be just that and you should better keep it to yourself. Has nobody ever told you so, Francis?” the bite made even Dazai flinch, even though Chuuya hadn’t addressed him.

“I apologize, I don’t mean to offend you, but my question remains.”

Dazai wanted to threaten the disgusting smile out of his face.

Before answering, Chuuya breathed out audibly, lips pressed into a thin line. It took him every ounce of self-control to not snap and Dazai laid a hand onto his tight, hoping it would calm Chuuya. They didn’t need to fuck this up, not when they were so close to their initial goal.

“How much I indulge in my company’s deals and publicity is none of your deal. Just know that I am aware of what goes on and that it’s currently lead by the best suited person. There’s no need to change a running system. Despite that, I wouldn’t trust it anyone else but Kouyou, who has not once failed to do the best for the company.” The words sharp, they were final but Dazai heard the wavering in his voice, the slight tremble increasing the more he spoke. He squeezed Chuuya’s tight.

After he had put down the spoon, having eaten the last bit of the desert, Fitzgerald folded the serviette neatly and placed it on the empty plate.

“I understand. What a pity, your parents surely had great hope for you.”

Dazai barely managed to yank Chuuya back into the seat by his wrist, gripping it tightly but not enough to hurt, the risk of Chuuya doing something stupid too high. If looks could kill, Fitzgerald would be dead now, cold blue eye’s staring him down. The tension in the room was unbearable.

Before anyone could say anything else, Dazai spoke up, “Fitzgerald, thank you for taking our invitation, but I think it’s time to come to an end. We appreciate your attendance, and hopefully the Guild and PREP will be able to cooperate in the future. May I show you to the door?”

The dinner had been a generous offer from Chuuya’s side, but of course that son of a bitch hat to ruin it. Maybe this was how business-world worked: false promises and double-sided swords everywhere, making Dazai grateful that he had nothing to do with it.

They all got up simultaneously, making the way to the exit, and while Alcott and Twain thanked them with honest gratitude, Dazai couldn’t shake the vibe of deceit that radiated from Fitzgerald, honestly hoping to never have to lay sight upon him again.

When the door shut, a flash of relief shot through his body, but then it hit him: Melville had remained seated, back facing them and had not moved an inch from the table.

Chuuya and he exchanged glances, Chuuya’s eyes narrowing in question. They had meant to make him stay behind and trap him, but they hadn’t anticipated it to be that easy, even if Asmodeus was the one controlling the body.

Before any of them could say a thing, a deep growl filled the room, inhuman and jarring and the blue glow encased Dazai fully as soon as the voice, shattering as thunder, sounded.

“A dinner - how amusing. I would have come at a simple call, you know?”

Chuuya slipped a hand under the vest, his fist gripping the handle.

He took one step forward, closer the demon.
It was wrong to have assumed to be able to trick a demon. Any impetuous action might lead to failure. Dazai should have considered their deceptive traits.

“If you knew about our plan,” Dazai said, “then why did still you come?”

The sharp crack cut through thick air, as Melville’s head turned far enough to have the spine break. Every trace of humanity had left the once elderly face, leaving dark red eyes to stare and burn right through Dazai. Coldness ran through his veins, sending a sharp pain down his spine.

“We’ve been looking for you, didn’t you know?” The corners of Melville’s lips pulled up, too wide to look normal. Dazai cringed.

Never before had he encountered Asmodeus. In fact, it had been a while since he had faced any demon. Why would the prince of lust be after him?

“Why?” Dazai didn’t sound as confident as he wanted to.

Light flickered as the demon rose from the chair and another wave of cold hit Dazai, the glow around his hands increasing.

Chuuya next to him held the knife up in defense, ready for the first throw; all he needed was Dazai’s order; his eyes flicked to Dazai nervously. Not yet. Dazai needed to know why he wandered on the surface, or at least a vague idea of the reason. He had even laid out traps and signs for them – there had to be an ulterior motive.

A light bulb blew up, the splitters flying through the room, yet none of them flinched but stood their ground.

“The reward on you is high, Osamu. Not even I could decline a price so precious. He’s really desperate to have you.”

That’s when Dazai knew what went on, the dots suddenly connecting. All these years, he had believed to have left the past behind, to have escaped the shadow following his every step, to have been freed of the fear – just to be proven wrong. He shouldn’t have ignored the signs, should have seen them.

“You’ve been sent to take me out.”

The ground quaked when Asmodeus set a food forward, closing some of the distance between them. Dazai noticed how the knife in Chuuya’s hand rose a little higher.

“I’m here to take you with me. The highness wouldn’t be delighted if I undertook what’s due to him. We’ve been looking for you long enough; it’s time to fulfill your obligations.” The growl rose, growing even deeper and seizing the space.

A shot of dark red, deeper than blood, flashed across the room, forcing Dazai to turn away, the light blinding him. His ability averted the hit an inch before it reached his body. Everything was so cold. The same moment, a knife got fired at the demon but missed its target, and Chuuya needed mere seconds to reach for the second one and hurl it at Asmodeus. A desperate snarl originated deep in Chuuya’s throat when it missed as well, hitting the wall behind the demon. The walls cracked

One red flash after another fired into their direction and Dazai’s ability flared out in blue ribbons to cancel the attacks, protecting both him and Chuuya, as Chuuya reached for the last knife.
He hurled it, right at the demon’s chest but deep red emerged to form a shield, making the house quake. The knife dropped to the floor. Asmodeus’s e.m.e. was too concentrated for anything to pass through.

More red circled in the room like fog, limiting their view. Only the glowing eyes and a faint shadow gave away the demon’s position.

“What now?” Chuuya shouted over the sounds of render falling off the ceiling as he dodged a flash that had slipped past Dazai’s ward.

Dazai had already prepared a plan for this particular case, the possibility of the first plan failing too high. “If you manage to distract him, I can shoot him. Use your ability!”

The room was a compound of different lights, the deep red against the bright blue. A second later, much brighter, more vivid red lighted up, clearer than the other and growing with every second.

“Hey, demon? How do you like that?” Chuuya yelled, as a ball of energy built up around his hands, then he let it go, directing it at the demon. The blow coming unexpected, it hit it right into the chest, the human body, used as a vessel, slamming against the wall. The recent training sessions paid off as his aim couldn’t have been more precise.

Dazai seized the opportunity to reach for his gun, but Asmodeus got onto his feet too quickly to shoot the bullet and attacked them anew.

From there on, it was a battle between red. Dazai’s ability didn’t get to interfere anymore, Chuuya now collecting the demon’s energy just to hurl it right back at him. The energy balls were meant to hit, but Asmodeus avoided them confidently and if Chuuya hadn’t been able to gather the demon’s energy, he wouldn’t be standing anymore.

But Asmodeus was distracted. All his attention seemed to be taken up by Chuuya’s attacks. This was Dazai’s chance. He pulled the trigger.

The first bullet missed Asmodeus by an inch.

The second one went through his shoulder.

The scream of agony threatened to burst the walls and out of a sudden, the demon’s energy retreated and concentrated around the body. The next second, Melville’s body slumped onto the ground, and another form, not from this world, stood next to it. He looked exactly like Sasaki had described. The black wings spread, taking up almost the length of the room. It was a horrendous creature. Dazai had no time to feel any fear, even as his throat dried out at the sight.

If he could get close enough to touch it, they would have done it; their mission would be a success. Dazai burst forward. He was only feet away from accomplishing their goal.

Red hit him and blue emerged as he stumbled back and fell to the floor with his hands held up high in front of his face, the light to bright.

How was this possible? Asmodeus should be weakened from the shot, even in his natural form. Where did the energy come from?

Deep laughter erupted, a bass that made your skin crawl. “You really think a tiny bullet is enough?” the demon mocked.

“Dazai!”
The lighter red vanished and Dazai heard something next to him, then a crash followed. Chuuya had been slammed into the table, lying there, unmoving.

Was he alright? He had to get up again or -

“Your little watchdog is quite a nuisance, but what a fool, even if a strong fool – letting his guard down so easily. A dog at your feet, ready to serve his master, isn’t he? Such a pretty pet.” Heavy steps made the floor creak as the demon approached Dazai who had barely managed to get onto his feet again. Blue ribbons danced around him restlessly.

Another shot echoed through the room, the sound causing a ring in Dazai’s ears but the bullet grazed the demon’s leg. It hissed and fired another flash of red at Dazai, whose ability barely managed to lash out at the attacking ball.

This wasn’t working. Asmodeus was too strong. Even if he could touch him now, it would do exactly nothing. All he could do now was to ward his attacks off. He needed a plan, quick. With Chuuya out of action, he had to rely on himself, but his bullets had no impact, his knives even less.

But he needed to act now or everything would be in vain.

He had one thing left and it would work. He would regret it, but that was his last resort.

“Oh Divine Eternal Father, in union with your divine son and the Holy Spirit –” The words weighted tons, each one more difficult to word than the one before, but they never failed, and they didn’t now.

Asmodeus roared in pain instantly, the energy decreased and he tumbled back, away from Dazai.

“and through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg you to destroy the Power of your greatest enemy –” Dazai hated it. He hated every word and every phrase and every sting of pain that welled up in his sides, the burning that came with it and pervaded his entire body.

The smoke that leaked from the demon made it worth it. The demon continued to scream as flashes of red shot across the room but nowhere nearly as aggressive and forceful as before. Dazai’s ability had no issue with keeping them at bay anymore. Just a little more, then he could touch him and send him away.

Trying to create another ball of energy, the demon straightened, face distorted and eyes gleaming with wrath, but he never got to fire. Instead bright red clashed into him, pinning him against the wall again, where the crack extended.

Dazai’s head snapped to the side to see Chuuya crouching on the ground, heaving but alive.

“What are you waiting for?” Chuuya snarled, “Go for him, now!”

He didn’t have to say that twice.

Dazai launched forward and cold hands wrapped around Asmodeus’ shoulders where rough skin threatened to cut his hands open, and Dazai squeezed his eyes shut to avoid looking into the light. Red yielded to blue as his grip tightened and smoke ascended. He wasn’t to let go just now.

Then, all he heard was a high pitched beep.

No walls surrounded him anymore. Everything had combusted into thousands of small pieces, the darkness and the silence of the night alone surrounding them. The form under his hands crumbled.
into ashes.

His knees gave way under him. Cold. Everything was so cold. It hurt more than anything else that should hurt right now. It stung like needles. Splinters cut through his pants, but the pain was nothing compared to how much his body hurt from the inside.

Warm arms embraced him from behind, a faint red glow illuminating them, radiating warmth. From underneath half-closed eyes, Dazai vaguely noted a trace of blood flowing down Chuuya’s arm.

“It’s done. We’ve done it.” Chuuya’s chin nestled into Dazai’s neck as he mumbled, but Dazai couldn’t comprehend everything yet; therefore, unable to give an answer.

Asmodeus was gone. They were alive. Hurt, but alive. Yet, it didn’t feel finished.

“You are trembling,” Chuuya stated, and the glow increased a little.

“I’m fine.” It was a lie, both of them knew it, but for now, it was enough. Dazai didn’t know how long they remained there, kneeling on the ground in silence and enclosed in Chuuya’s ability, but only when he stopped shivering, Chuuya let go of him.

“Is he alive?” Chuuya asked quietly, referring to the body in front of them which Dazai hadn’t even noticed until now. He extended a hand, checking for a pulse.

“Yes, barely, but he’s even breathing. He could make it.” In all honestly, Dazai had expected him to die, especially after he had come to witness Asmodeus strength. “We should take care of him.” “Leave him,” Chuuya said, “I’ll text Akutagawa, he’ll take care of itand the car accident is almost prepared. Let’s get us home.”

They hadn’t arranged that together, he hadn’t known of Akutagawa’s involvement but Dazai was too drained and exhausted to try wrapping his head around it. Instead, he nodded and let himself be pulled up. Despite the forceful hit, Chuuya didn’t happen to be severely injured, being able to walk with nothing more than a slight limp. Blood dripped from his nose and a smear covered half of his face, having tried to wipe it away. Dazai guessed he looked equally beaten up.

Under any other circumstances, Dazai would have questioned Chuuya’s ability to drive, but he couldn’t care less right now. The world seemed unreal. He wanted rest.

The car had been parked offside and as the ride went past Dazai’s comprehension, he barely noticed how Chuuya cast him worried glances from time to time, not bothered by anything.

His eyes only regained focus when his attention got caught by the flashing blue lights in front of his apartment block. Half dozen police cars had gathered on the street, along with ambulances. People shouted and scurried around the building, and Chuuya slowed down the car, driving past the scene as slowly as he could.

Blood covered the walls, symbols written with it. What stood out the most though was the sign of Erebus, bright and large over the entirety of the wall.

“Chuuuya,” Dazai whispered, “I think I can’t stay here tonight.”
Thanks for reading and for all the kudos and sweet comments <3 They really keep me motivated on continuing posting. Let me know your thoughts on the chapter :3
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hello again,
First of all, thank you for the sweet comments on the latest chapter and your support in general, they really make my day <3
Secondly, it's time to buckle up because it's gonna be a ride. There's ... a lot that's going to happen in the next chapters. You've been warned. Now, have fun with chapter 11, you might find some answers - or more questions.
Enjoy!

And I just realized, it's the weekend before christmas. I wish you all will have a happy and easy festive season and Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates!

TW: Scars/wounds, implication of abuse, mild description of gore

His back hurt, his legs still trembled and every single muscle burned under his skin as he ascended the stairs to his apartment. Behind him, Dazai’s footsteps followed cumbersomely and slowly.

The night hadn’t gone down as he had anticipated or hoped for. Everything was a mess, time passed too quickly and yet so slow, the past hours seemed to have happened days ago. And even though the entire mission had resolved their initial problem, a new one had presented itself. Subsequently, more and more questions had arisen and while Chuuya had at least some sort of energy left - the adrenaline still rushing through his veins - to be concerned with some of them, Dazai looked run over by a bus. He hadn’t even had enough power to be upset about the state of his flat, having said nothing but one sentence about the fact that the entire building had been vandalized. His usually sharp mind seemed to have shut off, having settled into a condition of apathy where it only responded to the absolute minimum.

When Chuuya had told him that he would come with him tonight, that he wouldn’t leave him alone in this condition, he had merely nodded and drifted off again. Trying to get any information out of him would be wasted effort.

Although Chuuya had a vague idea of what could be going on, remembering Dazai’s upset reaction when he had seen Erebus’ sign at the sacrifice, he wished to be more in the clear and to gain a full picture of the extend. In the back of his mind he recalled that he would need to inquire how the staged car crash had worked out from Akutagawa and that he somehow would have to explain to Kouyou that the bungalow was history now, but the thoughts didn’t manage to become a priority.

Those things would have to wait until the morning. For now, they both needed rest and nothing but that.

His hands trembled and he needed several attempts to push in the key and to open the door. He might have been quicker if he hadn’t tried to hurry for Dazai’s sake. Chuuya feared he would pass out any minute.

The door finally pushed open, he immediately discharged the dirty vest, which dropped onto the
floor with a metallic sound as he had forgotten about the remaining knives. Dazai did just the same with his jacket, throwing it on top of Chuuya’s clothes.

Entering the warm and cozy apartment, the tiredness hit Chuuya suddenly and within a second his limps felt a dozen times heavier than ever before.

“I don’t have a guest room, so you can either sleep on the-“ Chuuya begun, but there was no need in finishing the sentence, because Dazai had already sighted the couch and wordlessly made a beeline for it. As soon as he dropped, he was out cold. This night must have ultimately drained him.

A tiny voice in the back of his mind screeched as Dazai flopped into the cushions in his filthy attire, but it wasn’t a major deal. The couch could be cleaned.

In his bedroom, Chuuya grabbed a spare blanket, and after a second he decided for two, which turned out to be a good idea. Dazai was still freezing, making Chuuya fear that he suffered from hypothermia. At the same time he wondered, why his own ability had no similar effect on him. Sure, it was warm and when he used it everything got a little hotter, but it was nothing compared to the impact it had on Dazai.

Careful not to wake him, he covered Dazai with the sheets, tugging him in. If Dazai had waited, he could have had the bed, but nothing to be done about that one now. Only when he was sure that Dazai was fine and wouldn’t freeze to death in sleep, Chuuya dared to go to bed.

*_*_*_*

When Chuuya woke up the next morning, he wanted to die on the spot. If he had thought he had been in pain yesterday, he was now burning alive and he had yet to move properly.

Stretching his arms out, he cringed at the pain, causing even more muscles to hurt and he couldn’t help but groan in annoyance. For a brief moment he considered staying in bed all day, until the agony disappeared, but he knew from experience that lying would just increase the pain. As he ran a hand over his face, an attempt of wiping the tiredness away, he felt the filth gathering beneath his palm and he understood that a shower was indispensable.

He got out of bed and hissed as he set a foot on the floor. Walking seemed impossible, but somehow he made it into the shower. The hot water did little to ease the tension in his muscles, but he felt better when he got out, steam filling up the room. It reminded him of the demon’s ability….

But with the window wide open it cleared up in a few minutes.

What time was it?

He almost stepped out of the bathroom naked, forgetting about Dazai, but remembered last second to wrap a towel around his waist, just in case Dazai had woken up before him. As he strode back into his room, he cast a quick glance to the couch, seeing Dazai still soundly asleep. During the night he had kicked off one of the blankets, but had remained wrapped up in the other.

Chuuya’s phone told him it was close to noon, and the number of messages and missed calls made his stomach drop. He had a lot of explaining to do.
Akutagawa
[01:03 am] I’ve got it.
   It’s all set up, no need to worry.
[01:29 am] Job done. Ambulance is on its way. He should be fine.
[01:30 am] How are you? Everything alright?
[09:16 am] You alive?
   Atsushi told me about Dazai’s flat. Are you both alright?
   Melville is alive, but has severe amnesia if you care to know
[10:11 am] Chuuya?
[10:15 am] Answer my calls
[10:45 am] If I don’t hear from either you or Dazai the next hour I’ll send Atsushi to your place.
[10:47 am] I’m serious

Chuuya
[11:06 am] We’re alive. Tired and exhausted but alright
[11:07 am] sorry for not calling, we were out in seconds
   I’ll call you in a few, then you can tell me about what went down

There were also a few worried messages signed by Atsushi, asking how they were and going on about Dazai’s flat. He would need to call him as well in order to get more information about what had happened there. What scared him the most however, were the 16 missed calls from Kouyou.

Making a grimace he pressed down the call button below her contact and she picked up after the first ring.

“What the actual fuck, Chuuya?!”

Chuuya winced, biting the inner side of his lips. The tone in her voice indescribable, a mixture of anger, fear and worry, threw him off more than he liked. He shut the door to his room so that he wouldn’t wake Dazai before replying.

“I am fine, thanks for asking.”

“You are not in hospital?”

“No, I am at home, but it had been a rough night and –“

“You blew up an entire house! Did you know this was going to happen? You could have told me at least! Do you have an idea how many calls I got last night and this morning? I had to drive up there to find wasteland! For all I knew you could have been part of the ashes! Thank god your friend was kind enough to enlighten me.” Kouyou was upset. And with upset he meant out of her mind. And who had talked to her? Had Akutagawa told her anything?

Chuuya had in fact forgotten to mention the detail of destroying the bungalow. To be fair, he hadn’t thought it would make the round as quickly as it had and had hoped to explain it to her personally. So much for that.

Fumbling for words, he tried to calm her down. “I know this is crazy, but please believe me if I say it had to be this way.” How did you explain a situation like this? He couldn’t even tell her the truth, she wouldn’t believe him, would she?
“So you actually used explosives?!”

“NO! It just … happened!”

Silence spread on the other end of the line and he just waited for the next blow, but it didn’t come. Instead, he heard her sigh.

“And I wanted to go up there, spending my winter holiday there.”

“I can get it rebuild?” It was a tentative and honest proposal, but Chuuya anticipated her declination. Through the phone he heard a tapping sound, probably her nails on the table.

“We’ll get something better,” every trace of anger had now vanished and Chuuya exhaled in relief. That went well.

Kouyou continued, “I am sorry for shouting at you, but you really scared me. I had no idea what happened. Can you imagine how I felt when my phone exploded but I didn’t hear a scratch from you? And did you know that Melville had gotten into a car accident? He’s in hospital now. Fitzgerald told me, he called me when he heard about the explosion. He’s pretty upset, thinking it was a planned attack on him. You should call him and apologize, also to his coworkers, I am sure you –“ She was rambling by now but all that mattered was, that she wasn’t mad anymore. Chuuya would have been eaten up by the guilt.

“Kouyou, I’ve got this. Pass the calls on to me; you had nothing to do with this. I will sort this out; it’s my fault after all.” It would have been unfair to let her handle his mistakes. He would find a story to tell the agencies and insurances, Dazai would act as his witness later so they would be fine. Nobody will find evidence to distrust them anyway.

Another sigh. “Okay. I am just glad that you are safe. I was so scared.”

“We are sound. No need to worry.” His voice softened when he heard hers wavering, “I have to hang up now, there are some calls I have to make. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Stay safe, Chuuya.”

“I will.”

The call ended and he wasted no time to call the next person. In a few minutes his phone would blow up with calls from every company possible who inquired information about the instance. If he wanted to gather information for his own purpose, he had to do it now.

It rung thrice, until a smooth voice answered.

“Nakajima.”

“Hey, Atsushi, it’s me, Chuuya.”

“Oh my god, Chuuya! Thank god you are alive! How’s Dazai, is he okay?” Somehow, the boy sounded even more worried than Kouyou had.

“Yes, we are both fine, but Dazai is still asleep. The fight yesterday really strained him. I actually called to ask you –“

“Wait a second, I’m going to put you on speaker.”

Chuuya heard shuffling, somebody talking in the background and then a second, more familiar
“You make me believe you have died and still have the audacity to call Atsushi first? And yet I still call you my friend?” The accusation was thrown into the room, making Chuuya’s jaw clench.

Of course Akutagawa had to be with Atsushi, now he felt bad for not calling him first, especially not after what he had done for Chuuya. It really shouldn’t come across as if he took that for granted.

“I am so sorry Akutagawa, but there’s something I need to know. I don’t have a lot of time, but firstly, thank you for taking care of Melville. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

Fortunately, Akutagawa didn’t sound genuinely upset. “Dazai’s little ghost friends sure did a good job with preparations. All I had to do was to place Melville in the wreck.” The tiniest bit of tension left Chuuya’s shoulders.

“Glad to hear. But I actually called to find out about what happened with Dazai’s flat.”

Silence spread, along with an unsettling feeling in Chuuya’s stomach.

Atsushi answered, although uncertainly, “Everything got destroyed. There is no wall left unscathed and everyone in there had been killed. It was a mess. Kunikida currently suspects a cult, but it’s the other demon, right? The symbol is the same.”

Chuuya didn’t dare imagining what would have happened to Dazai if he had been in there. But Atsushi had to be right, who else other than Erebus himself would have left the mark behind? No cult would ever go that far, especially not on a building that probably had no associations with demons other than Dazai. What had been Erebus motive?

“Maybe, I don’t know yet. Is there any chance I might get a look into Dazai’s flat?”

“The investigations are still ongoing, so there are a lot of people there, but at around one they take a break. If you really want to get in there, you could probably sneak in.” The last words merely mumbled, as Atsushi immediately felt bad for going against the rule, Chuuya still understood every word.

Even if they were investigators around, he surely would find a way around them, but if they were gone anyway, it would help him a lot.

“I might do just that!”

“But be careful to not leave any traces! Our team is wary.”

“I will be, thank you very much. I need to hang up now, we’ll talk-“

Akutagawa interrupted him, “And you don’t want to tell us what actually happened yesterday?”

In the very same moment, his phone vibrated and he held it in front of his face to see another incoming call from the insurance company. There we go.

“Can I call you back? My phone is about to blow up, and I am quite occupied. I promise we will tell you everything later!”

“Don’t you dare forgetting about it.”

“I won’t.”
Two hours and twelve phone calls later he stood in front of yellow barrier tape. He pulled the hood deeper into his face.

‘crime scene - do not cross’

Well, that was that. Avoiding touching it, he crawled through, entering the scene without second thought. He needed information on what had happened. Perhaps it would have been useful to bring Dazai with him, who had a lot more experience and most likely some background information on the current situation, if Chuuya assessed Asmodeus’ words correctly. The demon hadn’t said much last night, but he had talked in a way that implicated that Dazai should know why he did what he did. If Dazai had joined him here, he would probably know what to do with whatever they found. But at the same time, he had been so exhausted yesterday, physically and mentally, Chuuya didn’t dare bringing him here.

When he had left his apartment, Dazai had still been asleep, not shaken by any of the few sounds Chuuya made when crossing the room, having been extra cautious to be silent. Dazai needed the rest after last night. Chuuya wasn’t sure how much Dazai generally slept, but he had a feeling that it wasn’t a lot. Although he never appeared tired, he never seemed to be properly rested either; therefore, Chuuya wouldn’t be the one to wake him from the first healthy nap he got in weeks.

Dazai would probably curse him for doing this on his own, but he would take pictures that he could show his partner later.

The building reeked of iron and putrefaction and Chuuya was glad for the cold weather or it would smell considerably worse. Occasionally, a fly would change its sitting spot on one of the blood-drawn symbols, which resembled the ones from the sacrifice.

In front of the main door he stopped, checking the doorbells for Dazai’s name which was written on one of the buttons for the third floor. His muscles still ached and he thanked fate for not sending him up to the topmost floor.

To his surprise, the front door turned out to be unlocked when gloved hands pushed, and he paused a second to listen for any sounds that indicated the presence of people. Nothing but silence met him. With quick steps, at least as quick as his feet allowed to, he rushed up the staircase, where blood had been spilled and dried while dripping down the stairs. Chuuya had to pay attention to not step into it and leave footprints.

Finding Dazai’s flat happened to be ridiculously easy. On each door a sheet of paper with the flat’s owner had been attached, next to it a strange symbol. Chuuya looked around to see that Dazai’s symbol differed from the ones around him. Then it dawned on him that they were to tell if the owner had deceased or not. He shivered at the sight of so many casualties.

The entrance blocked by more yellow tape, he struggled to climb through the net, thanks to his sore body, and he stumbled a little when he slid the second leg through a loop, cursing silently.

He had to shake a feeling of unease as he entered Dazai’s privacy just like that, without even asking for permission first, which suddenly didn’t sit right with him. But he did this for a reason. His guts told him he had to keep Dazai away from here, and that’s exactly what he would do. Dazai
could scold him all he wanted later, but Chuuya would hate himself if he let Dazai in there now, and he would understand eventually.

What struck him first about the flat wasn’t the ripped and broken furniture or the traces of blood on the floor or the symbols on the walls, but how uninhabited the space felt. Of all the possible living situations he had imagined Dazai to have, this flat didn’t happen to be one of them.

It was small, overall not bigger than Chuuya’s open kitchen and except for some books scattered on the ground and some clothing pieces in the doorway he didn’t see any personal belongings that indicated somebody’s regular presence. A picture of banknotes in Dazai’s bandaged hands popped into his mind. Dazai made so much money with the cases, and yet he lived like that? Why?

Careful not to come in contact with anything, making him walk on tiptoes, he stalked further into the main room. The small runes on the walls were the same as downstairs. He wished he knew what they meant. There had to be significance to them; maybe they were meant to be read like another language – a question he would ask Dazai later.

Overall, less blood had been spread in here than in the hallway, probably due to the lack of a body, but what he hadn’t seen before, not in this building or at the sacrifice, were the huge blocks of text, scribbled across the entire wall.

‘You cannot hide’

‘You belong to me’

‘I will come for you’

They could have been straight out of a horror movie; who would have thought clichés could become reality? Chuuya pulled out his phone to snap a few pictures of the room. He stumbled across more sentences, written in a smaller, neater font.

‘Running away, as usual?’

‘Pathetic’

‘You won’t escape’

‘I am after you’

Chuuya photographed every wall, every sentence and every symbol he could find.

He thought about how just weeks ago, a sight as brute as this would have scared him into denial and ignorance. Now, the terrible smell didn’t even cause any nausea, having gotten too used to gore. He questioned if this was a good thing.

As he stepped over some books on the ground, his gaze grazed their covers. Some of them were collections of poetry, others dealt with suicide. One time, Dazai had mentioned books about demons, where he looked up information, but Chuuya couldn’t find them anywhere. He spotted the one Dazai had been reading when they had first met, a ‘suicide guide’. Was that really what the book was about? His fingers itched to pick it up and skim through it, but he feared changing the crime scene in any way, so he thought of a better and let it be, remaining curious.

Everything about the flat brought up an immense amount of questions; he wouldn’t be able to remember them all until he returned home. His mind felt like a big question mark. Nothing made sense to him anymore.
Chuuya stalked past the bathroom and into the bedroom, stopping mid-track in the doorway.

Every piece of fabric had been shredded into pieces, but his attention was fully on the pentagram on the floor. Not the pentagram itself appeared so odd to him, having seen it often enough by now, but what lay in its middle.

A head - not any kind of head, but a very familiar one.

Seeing the backside sufficed to identify it as Asmodeus’ severed head. How was this possible? He had witnessed with his own eyes how the body had dissolved under Dazai’s touch. And why was it here in first place? Just to mock Dazai?

Tentatively, he approached the head, rounding it to have a better look. The skin reflected the spare light coming from outside as if it was made out of plastic. Maybe that’s exactly what it was? Plastic?

Despite having been so meticulous about not touching anything, he couldn’t resist. He wore gloves, he should be fine.

As soon as a finger touched the harsh skin, the eyes blinked open, glowing red, and a spark of energy flared up, sending a wave through his body that resembled electricity. Chuuya yelped in shock, pulling back his hand instantly and pressing it into his chest. The eyes closed again, as if nothing had happened.

Every time he believed nothing could surprise him anymore, he got proven wrong.

He skidded back in a hurry, away from the pentagram and the head. He would pretend this never happened.

After he had made sure to have documented everything, he made a last round through the flat, checking if he had forgotten anything. A look at his phone told him that the investigators should return in about ten minutes and he made it out of the building without any interruptions.

That had gone down well enough. He had hoped to be able to search some other flats for more clues, but he was running out of time, so he had to ditch that idea. Hopefully Dazai could do something with the information he had gathered.

Standing in the shadow of the doorway, he checked the street for anyone watching, before risking leaving the building behind. Only when he had made sure that nobody was around he hurried around the corner.

“Excuse me.”

Chuuya jumped at the voice behind him. Damn it. Where did that come from? He almost didn’t believe it, he had watched so cautiously and there had been nobody. The street had been empty.

He took a deep breath. Keep calm, don’t act suspiciously.

He turned on his heels to look into the face of a man around his age, taller than him, with black hair. His white clothes almost blinded him

Chuuya put effort into sounding unbothered. “Yes? How can I help you?”

The man smiled at him. “I am looking for Osamu Dazai, he should live here, but the building is closed up.”
He spoke with an accent Chuuya assumed to be Russian. But why would he be looking for Dazai? Something about this man rubbed him the wrong way. He couldn’t pin it down, but considering the current circumstances, a stranger asking for Dazai struck him as odd.

“Why do you need to know?”

“I am a friend of his, he had given me a job to do and I intended to inform it that it got executed successfully.”

Chuuya furrowed his eyebrows. If he understood correctly, the man was talking about the staged car crash. Dazai had mentioned some ‘ghost-friends’ that had been eager to help, but the man didn’t appear to be a ghost. As diligently as he looked, he couldn’t detect any kind of glow. Maybe Dazai had forgotten to mention him - he too hadn’t told him about Akutagawa helping out either. However, he couldn’t be sure of that.

“I have no idea about his whereabouts, but if I happen to meet him any time soon I can pass on a message. Can I know your name?”

The man’s tilted his face to one side in interest in a manner that was too similar to Dazai and Chuuya hated it. “Are you a friend of his? I am truly worried for him; I hope he hasn’t fallen into the claws of the demon. When you see him, tell him Fyodor Dostoevsky is looking for him.”

The name meant nothing to Chuuya, having never heard it before - a reason more to distrust him.

“You could say so. I will tell him.”

“Thank you. Have a nice day and take care of yourself.” Although the words meant to be friendly, Chuuya believed he had never seen such a fake smile in his life. He watched the man, who hadn’t waited for a reply, walking down the street. What was up with that guy?

Ahead of him, multiple people in yellow full body suits approached, announcing the return of the investigators and simultaneously signaling Chuuya that he had to leave, now.

As he walked to his car he realized that today he had lied for the first time without a feeling of disgust settling in his guts.

*-*-*-*

His mind hadn’t been able to rest for the entire drive, the thoughts going back and forth between the threats on the wall, the severed head and the talk with that strange man. He was confused, unsure and the need to put the puzzle pieces together grew with every passing minute. What was he missing out on?

He opened the door to a silent apartment. Dazai was probably still sleeping, despite the late time. Maybe he should wake him after all. He wouldn’t admit his selfish motives of wanting to pry for information. But firstly, he needed to wash his hands. After touching that damn head, they felt filthy and itchy. The gloves he had worn did little to alleviate that feeling.

Walking straight to the bathroom he didn’t even notice that the light inside was switched on and he opened the door zestfully. He froze.
In front of the mirror stood Dazai, bandages discharged, hair dripping wet and a towel slung around his waist. Chuuya didn’t want to, but it was hard not to stare. He didn’t miss the faint white and red scars all over his body but his eyes got stuck on Dazai’s ribs - or rather the skin. Across his ribcage, bright red stood out against pale skin, faint traces of blood around them. Something about their arrangement was weird.

The moment passed by slowly, making it seem as if he stood there for minutes, although he was well aware it couldn’t have been more than a second before Dazai growled, “Get out.”

Chuuya’s eyes snapped up to look into Dazai’s, full with fury.

He stuttered, unable to form a proper sentence, “I am – so sorry. I didn’t know that – that you were in there, please –”

“Get out!” The words cut the tense atmosphere in half. Dazai wrapped his arms around his body tightly, in an attempt to hide the scars but he couldn’t cover them all. Chuuya snapped back to senses. Dazai wasn’t angry. He was embarrassed. Self-conscious.

The door slammed shut, leaving Dazai alone in the bathroom and Chuuya outside, baffled and stunned and endlessly sorry. Within a day he had managed to intrude Dazai’s privacy twice but the second time much more severely.

He had stopped wondering about the reason for Dazai’s bandages a while ago, having accepted the fact that he would never find out and at one point he had begun thinking they were actually attached to his skin. Seeing Dazai without them, so vulnerable, changed the picture he had of Dazai. So many scars. What must he have endured?

What concerned him the most however, were the open wounds on his sides. If they didn’t get treated properly they would infect, causing even more pain, maybe even endangering Dazai’s life.

“Dazai?” he didn’t dare to speak up loudly, “I am so sorry. I didn’t want to walk in on you, but I thought you were still sleeping.” He tried to explain the situation, his voice sounding awkward in his own ears, just so Dazai didn’t feel as invaded as he probably did. He had no idea if it worked.

“I know you don’t want me to see you like that, but those wounds have to be treated. If we don’t take care of them it will only get worse.” He paused, listening if Dazai had anything to say, but he remained silent.

“Please, let me help you. I – You have nothing to fear. I just want you to be safe.”

Chuuya pretended he wouldn’t be hurt if Dazai didn’t open the door. It was his right to do so; he didn’t owe Chuuya sharing what he had fought to keep hidden for so long. They haven’t been working together long enough that ultimate trust could have built between them. Yet, a tiny, shaky spark inside his heart that made it beat a little faster, believed that they have grown to be more than simple working colleagues.

He had trusted Dazai with his own secrets and emotions more than once now, knowing that they were safe with him and at the same time, Dazai had entrusted him his life. But if Dazai hadn’t been able to confide in him as much emotionally wise, it was alright, he wasn’t entitled to blame Dazai for that. It didn’t hurt.

The handle lowered with a click and the door swung open slowly. Dazai had lowered his head, staring at the ground and one hand still covered his chest, but he had opened the door. Chuuya felt warm inside.
He didn’t force Dazai to make eye-contact but went straight for the cabin under the sink to pull out the med kit.

“Sit on the bath tub.” As he rummaged through the box for the proper tools, he vaguely saw how Dazai did as he had said, still not looking up.

His hands washed, Chuuya sat down next to Dazai wordlessly, inspecting the wounds. The first layer of skin had somehow been removed at places, partially the wounds reached even deeper and seeing the full picture, Chuuya understood why they appeared so odd – the wounds were symbols just like the ones in Dazai’s flat, carved into skin. How? Nothing his imagination came up with could explain how those wounds could have formed. At the same time, he didn’t have the courage to ask. It was enough that he was allowed to see them.

Gently he began cleaning up the area around the wounds, not from dirt but blood that had still been dripping after the shower. The edges were clean and sharp, as if cut with a scalpel, without any traces of dirt. Not once did Dazai flinch or hiss or show any sign of discomfort.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Chuuya feared that every word he said would hit too close to home, making Dazai uncomfortable, but concern had him asking.

He noticed Dazai’s jaw clenching, the grip he had around the tub’s rim tightening. “Look at me. Don’t you think I have gotten used to it already?”

Chuuya paused. It felt wrong to look at Dazai’s scars so obviously even with permission but he couldn’t resist the want to understand. His eyes wandered from his neck where a thin scar dragged across, to his chest where several large healed gashes sat, to his arms and legs, littered with hundreds of smaller and larger, shallower and deeper scars, some of them faded to white, others not.

Chuuya feared to imagine what Dazai had been through. He opened his mouth just to say something, but Dazai stopped him, “Don’t say you’re sorry. It has been years. It’s over.”

Gulping, Chuuya nodded in acceptance, returning to cleaning the wounds. When he deemed them sterile enough, he covered them with Polysporin. Later he would put bandages over them but they needed to breathe first. He got up and Dazai skittered to the side in order to make space to sit for Chuuya by his other side.

When the cloth touched skin, Dazai spoke up again, tone low, “It’s the holy spell. Each time I use one the wounds rip open again. That’s why I avoid using them.”

While it cleared how they occurred, Chuuya still struggled to comprehend how it worked.

“Why?”

“Demons are allergic to holy spells. Especially not when their property uses them.”

Ire sparked up in every one of Chuuya’s cells, “Don’t talk about yourself like that. Why would you say –“

“What else would you describe someone who has been running around cursed and marked for the most part of his life?”

A curse. The word repeated in Chuuya’s head over and over again, but its meaning didn’t reach him. He knew what a curse was, but to him, curses had always been part of books and movies – and he had thought exactly that about everything else just weeks ago.
The realization of how everything was obscure and unbelievable and yet so real and part of his life now had happened days ago. What just hit him like a stroke was the realization that not even Dazai with his nullifying ability was invincible.

“I don’t understand,” Chuuya said.

“Of course you don’t,” for the first time since Chuuya had entered, Dazai made eye-contact with him. “There’s no way you could. Nobody would. You haven’t been running around with a reminder of the day you almost died for years. You don’t have to look at it every day, don’t have to feel how it burns as a reminder of how much you fucked up this time, you-,” Sheer disgust gleamed in Dazai’s eyes, only directed at himself. Chuuya’s heart wrenched as he spoke.

“It shouldn’t have escalated like it had. If my ability had been a little stronger, it wouldn’t have turned out like this.” Every word more silent than the one before, his voice cracked and he bit into his lower lip so hard, Chuuya feared he would draw blood.

Dazai always kept up his mysterious and upbeat personality, always knew when to be serious and when to step back. But nobody could stand strong at all times, not even Dazai. It was wrong of Chuuya to have assumed that, coming to understand that underneath the layers of confidence hid a deeply scared and shattered soul.

And Chuuya understood that he was probably the first person to see what lay beneath the mask.

Dazai trembled, his breath uneven, and Chuuya wished there was anything he could do take some of the weight off Dazai’s shoulders. However, he couldn’t, he could only try and make the situation easier, taking Dazai’s mind off it. His thoughts briefly flickered back to today’s discoveries and all the questions he had, but for no money in the world would he talk with Dazai about it now, not before Dazai wasn’t back to his old self. For now, Chuuya would take care of him.

He quickly finished up the second side and pulled out some bandages which he wrapped around Dazai’s ribcage carefully. His sight fell on the pile of discharged bandages on the floor, filthy and bloody and scanning Dazai’s body quickly, he noted that he had no other injuries that needed treatment, but the pale scars remained prominent.

“What do you want me to cover your scars, or do you think you’re fine?” Chuuya put effort into making it sound like a normal question. It was, after all. Dazai had nothing to be uncomfortable about.

Big eyes watched him warily and as he sat there, unfiltered and frightened, he appeared so small. Had he always been this thin?

The answer came hesitantly, “If you don’t mind I would like to leave them uncovered.”

Chuuya got up. “I’ll get you something to wear, wait a second.”

Then he hurried into the bedroom. He knew he wouldn’t have any sweatpants that wouldn’t be inches too short, but he could serve with boxers and he believed to own an oversized sweatshirt from years ago that should be even too large for Dazai.

When he finally found it in the top shelf of the closet, he returned to the bathroom. Dazai hadn’t moved an inch and still sat on the edge of the tub. Chuuya placed the clothes on the sink.

“I’m going to order food, do you have any preferences?” Originally, he had intended to cook but had tossed the idea earlier, still too tired and nowhere fit enough to stand in the kitchen for an hour now.
“Anything with crab should be fine.”

Chuuya could work with that. He closed the door, swiped through the menus he had saved on his phone until he had one that satisfied their cravings while changing jeans for sweats and called.

Just as he hung up, sitting cross-legged on the couch, Dazai joined him in the living room.

Chuuuya had let the larger part of the L-shaped couch unoccupied on purpose, and as he pulled a blanket off the backrest, he gestured Dazai to sit down there. Today, they would do absolutely nothing. If Dazai wanted to talk, they would, if he didn’t, they wouldn’t. For now, they were safe and everything else could wait until tomorrow.

Unsure what to do, Dazai remained in the doorframe, awkwardly inspecting the room as if he had never seen it, which probably wasn’t far off. Chuuya doubted he had had the head for proper inspection until now and he could only guess what he would conclude and make fun of but to his surprise, Dazai didn’t comment.

“Come on, sit down. We’re free today, nobody is going to hurt us for spending a day off.” Chuuya said as a hand patted the place next to him. Only then did Dazai move to curl up in the corner of the couch and he immediately wrapped himself in the fuzzy blanket.

Chuuya raised an eyebrow, “Are you still cold?”

“Mhm, it’s better than in the morning though, it’s going to wear off soon”, Dazai mumbled into the fabric. Good that Chuuya had an idea of what could help.

“Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

Chuuya smiled at Dazai’s skeptical expression, “I’m not going to rip your fingers off. Come on.”

Cautiously, Dazai placed his own hand in Chuuya’s palm and as soon as skin touched, red light emerged. The sigh that slipped past Dazai’s lips made Chuuya smile. Carefully, he slid closer to Dazai, the red glow extending to cover his entire body and Dazai slipped into his arms with ease. Chuuya could even feel the coldness through the hoodie, but with time he warmed up.

Lying there, with Dazai’s head nestled onto his chest, one arm wrapped around his middle, should feel strange and foreign, but it was everything Chuuya wanted and needed in this moment, after everything that had happened. He didn’t feel the need to talk or do anything and the longer they laid there in silence, just enjoying each other’s company, the more comfortable Chuuya felt.

Even if the entire world would turn against them, even if their lives would be torn apart tomorrow, at least they had each other.

A ring on the doorbell forced them apart as Chuuya had to get up and answer. Dazai had dozed off, and Chuuya’s heart melted when he tightened the grip he had around him and whined as Chuuya pushed to stand up.

“It’s food and I am hungry and you haven’t eaten anything as well, so I have to get that.”

Reluctantly, Dazai let go of him and Chuuya missed the touch as soon as it was gone.

When he returned to the living room, Dazai sat upright, waiting for him and Chuuya left it to him to unwrap the package while he got cutlery from the kitchen. Usually, these moments only
happened with Kouyou and while the situation appeared familiar, it was nothing alike. This was different. This was a different kind of home and one Chuuya would love to get used to, he realized.

As the day had progressed, the sun had begun setting and at the sight of how beautifully the orange sunset light framed Dazai’s features, Chuuya knew that, despite the circumstances, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while, perched on the couch between blankets and pillows, and with the first bite Chuuya realized how hungry he had actually been; the same apparently applied for Dazai, who practically inhaled the food. Some color had returned to Dazai’s face and overall he appeared to be better now, less shaken and more confident again.

Chuuya couldn’t help it, but from time to time his eyes grazed the few of Dazai’s scars that were visible and he silently wondered what had caused them. It was human curiosity, but human decency held him back from asking. But the guilty conscience at having intruded Dazai’s flat remained, despite the more or less noble intentions.

“I hope I don’t upset you, and I am again sorry, for not talking to you before, but I’ve been at your flat this morning.”

Dazai stopped chewing to look at Chuuya. Relief washed over him when he noticed Dazai to be curious, not angry or stirred.

“What have you found?”

Chuuya had expected him to ask for a reason or to at least reprimand him, but when nothing followed, he answered, “Everything got demolished. I couldn’t even find a piece of clothing that was intact.”

Dazai merely shrugged and Chuuya continued, “I also found out, that all people who were in there have been killed most likely, and there were tons of symbols on the walls. You know, like the one’s on your –.” He didn’t dare saying it out loud, not knowing why, but with a hand he motioned at his own ribs. Dazai’s jaw clenched and Chuuya feared to have triggered him in some way, but then Dazai nodded slowly.

“It’s a demonic language. I know how to translate some parts, but I have never figured it out wholly. If I had to make a guess, I’d say they are some words of worship and praise, maybe even insults?” Dazai continued to suck in a noodle.

Well, that was new information, but at least something Chuuya could work with. Maybe Dazai could show him how to translate some parts, so they could figure out what the inscription means.

“There were also phrases, written in English, most likely for you. I have pictures if you want to –“

“Tomorrow. Didn’t you say we were free tonight?”

Pupils widening briefly, Chuuya then nodded, returning his attention to the food. Dazai was right. He had promised to make this an easy evening and tomorrow was another day.

“I’m sorry. So, what do you want to do for the rest of the day?” Even though Chuuya asked, he didn’t need Dazai to answer to know what they would do.

Dazai hummed in thought. “I like it a lot on the couch, can we just stay here?” and Chuuya’s lips pulled up into a soft smile.
“Of course we can.”

The dirty dishes were put aside, somewhere on the floor and no sooner had Chuuya settled comfortably again, Dazai snuggled close to him, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Chuuya didn’t mind at all. Again, he activated his ability, just the slightest, but it was enough to have Dazai snuggle even closer, the action drawing another smile from Chuuya.

“Don’t you dare drooling on me,” he warned Dazai, if only to make fun of him a little.

“I would never, and if, I would make sure you’d drown in my spit before you even notice,” Dazai retorted dryly, at which Chuuya snorted at Dazai’s stupidity.

For a few minutes, they argued about which movie to watch, without any heat behind the words, and in the end they settled for a classic sci-fi movie. Admittedly, Chuuya only watched halfheartedly, too occupied with feeling Dazai’s body against his own and perfectly they fit together.

He didn’t know when he had begun drawing small patterns on Dazai’s back, but he felt how Dazai stiffened as his fingers traced over a particularly prominent scar, palpable through the fabric. Chuuya was about to withdraw his hand, when Dazai sighed and relaxed and Chuuya’s heart rate picked up with joy, the action showing just how much Dazai trusted him.

Nobody could have wiped the smile off his face anymore that night.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Feel free to let me know what you think about the chapter in the comments :3 I am curious to hear your thoughts!
They had fallen asleep on the couch and Chuuya’s already strained muscles yelled at him when he woke up to a numb arm, a hurting shoulder and a stiff back but seeing Dazai soundly asleep on his chest made the pain worth it.

As the TV was still turned on, showing the default stand by screen, he groped for the remote as best as he could with the additional weight but it had gotten kicked away during the night and lay out of reach for Chuuya’s hands. Okay then.

Theoretically, he should have gotten up and ready for the day, getting Dazai’s stuff clean so that he could at least go out on the street looking decent and he probably should have called Kouyou to tell her that everything had been taken care off, but practically, he didn’t want to let go of the moment just now. Some of Dazai’s stray hair tingled Chuuya’s neck and he felt his chest rising and sinking so rhythmically as only was possible asleep. He appreciated every second he could spend like that and before he knew he dozed off again.

The next time he woke up due to a weight lifting from his upper body. Slowly he slipped back into consciousness, just like Dazai next to him. As he stretched his sorrow muscles, a somewhat pleasureable heat in his groin made itself noticeable and Chuuya couldn’t hold back the annoyed groan. He refused to pay further attention to it; it would go away as soon as he moved. Now he really had no excuse to lie in.

The rest of the morning they spent with breakfast, laundry and taking turns with the bathroom and changing Dazai’s bandages, underneath which the wounds seemed to heal well. None of them appeared to be talkative, but they organized their way around each other as if they had been doing it for years and Chuuya wondered if this was normal. Watching Dazai walk around in his home, unrestrained and confidently, was a sight he wanted to get used to.

When Dazai walked out of the bathroom, hair still a mess and sleeves rolled up, displaying all the scars on his forearm, Chuuya couldn’t take his eyes off him. No matter how low Dazai thought of himself, to Chuuya he was nothing but beautiful, making his heart picking up pace and his stomach liquid.

He blinked a few time as Dazai sat down. Where did these thoughts come from? He shook his head in confusion. The only reason he could think up would be a dream he had forgotten and that had still an impact on him. It wouldn’t be the first time.

While they were waiting for the dryer to finish, Chuuya showed Dazai, whose controlled and
cocky personality had reappeared, the pictures he had taken the day prior.

Looking at them again, Chuuya recognized some symbols to be also carved into Dazai’s ribcage.

When Dazai read the English words, he winced a little, but they didn’t upset him.

“I know that Erebus is after me. He’s been for years, I guess. I just wonder how he managed to come back to earth.”

Chuuya didn’t need much more to connect the dots, but for good measures he still asked, “So Erebus is the one who ‘cursed’ you?”

He didn’t need more of an answer than the emotionless stare he received to stop prying further but instead asked, “If he can’t come here on his own, then somebody must have summoned him, right?”

Propping his head up on his hands, Dazai watched him thoughtfully and Chuuya could see how his mind considered his assumption, combining it with the other facts he had.

“You are probably right, but summoning such a high ranking demon is no easy task. It would take special skills to pull that off.”

“Which means?”

“Nothing more than what I just said, I just wanted to have mentioned it.”

Chuuya raised an eyebrow, unsatisfied with the answer, but how could he be angry if Dazai smiled at him like that? He only noticed now that while talking, both of them had leaned further over the table, closer to each other, and as he let his gaze wander over Dazai’s bare neck, over the scarred but soft skin, warmth spread in his stomach again. He never got to close the space between them.

Shrill beeping signaled the end of the drying program and Chuuya went to pull the clothes out. Dazai had decided earlier that they had to pay ‘Lucy’s Dream Cup’ a visit; however had refused to tell him why and only claimed that he would find out anyway. Dazai had an irritating habit of making small details into surprises and secrets. Dazai just couldn’t go the easy road.

Chuuya tossed the clothes at Dazai, who caught them midair and flashed a grin at him, before disappearing into the bathroom again, signaling Chuuya that they would head out soon. As Chuuya slipped out of his sweats, he had to note to his displeasure that the warmth in his groin or the strain on his boxers hadn’t vanished and he bit the inner side of his lip. He really had to get his body under control again, but he had no time to work on that matter.

Silently cursing, he changed into jeans and a long-shirt that would hopefully be enough of a cover for the time being.

Today, Chuuya entered the café for the first time, and not much to his surprise the interior reflected the design of the garden to the point. Pink accents everywhere, white furniture, plants and flowers spread in the entire room. Inside, it smelled like pure coffee and sugar, and Chuuya scrunched his nose up at the sweet scent. He trailed after Dazai who paid no attention to any guests but at least had the decency to greet the waitresses as he passed by and aimed right for the back, where he opened a door with the banner ‘private office’ without as much as knocking. As strange as it was, Chuuya had no time to mull over the impoliteness of the act as Dazai immediately began talking to someone Chuuya could not see yet, Dazai’s tall figure blocking the view.

“Lucy, nice to see you! How are you today?” Dazai’s words conveyed an exaggerated friendliness
and Chuuya pushed past him to see who he was speaking to. The lady sitting at a small office table, apparently Lucy and most likely the owner of this shop, had bright red hair and wore a blue dress and rolled her eyes at Dazai’s welcoming.

“Let me guess, you’ve forgotten the key again?”

Chuuya didn’t have a clue what she referred to, so he silently watched Dazai rubbing his neck in false embarrassment. A spark of what some people would call jealousy lit up in his chest, and he gritted his teeth. It didn’t sit right with him that Dazai seemed to trust her a lot, especially after what they had shared last night. Who knew what they had done in the past.

“More or less, I locked it inside.”

Lucy groaned, head thrown into her neck and she pushed her swivel chair away from the desk. “How can one person so smart be so stupid?” she said as she got up.

“I am not, I was in a hurry. And after all, it’s better it’s in there, or I would have probably lost it by now.”

She didn’t glance at him while she walked over to a cabinet and took out a key on a chain, “I don’t even want to know what you were up to.”

The cabinet’s doors closed with a bang. Her eyes then fell on Chuuya and widened a fraction before she squinted at him, as if she had noticed his presence only now. Chuuya could have lived without her judgmental graze, but it yielded to a warm smile shortly after.

“You must be Chuuya, Dazai has told me about you! I’m Lucy, the owner of this shop, nice to meet you.”

Surprised by the sudden friendliness, he politely accepted her firm handshake; however, he got no chance to reply as she smoothly slipped past him into the hallway. Chuuya looked back and forth between her and Dazai. What was he supposed to do now?

He got pushed out the door – Following her it was.

She lead them to the end of the hallway, where she unlocked one of the two other doors, looking as normal as it possibly could, and opened it.

“Don’t forget your key. You’re lucky I was here today, usually it’s my day off.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Dazai retorted and Lucy scoffed before turning away and leaving Chuuya and Dazai alone. Chuuya couldn’t believe his eyes when he entered, after they had adjusted to the dim light.

The door had opened to showcase a room, just a little smaller than Dazai’s entire apartment, where books stacked in shelves. By the walls stood several cabinets, and Chuuya immediately knew they were filled with weapons, some of them hanging on display on the walls. If he ever had to imagine a secret chamber, it would look exactly like this. It even smelled a little musty.

Who would have thought that behind such a girly café hid such a violent storage? Dust stuck to his fingertips as he trailed the back of a particular thick book, bound in leather and with yellowed pages, giving away the book’s ancient nature.

In the corner he spotted an armchair, looking as if it had once been used frequently as the leather’s color had faded out at some spots and Chuuya could only imagine, Dazai, sitting in there with his
legs crossed and engrossed in the book. The scholarly look would definitely suit Dazai, and some pictures appeared in his head, so obscene that he usually wouldn’t even dare thinking of.

“You can pull that one out, we’ll need it.”

Chuuya jumped when Dazai’s voice appeared behind him out of a sudden. He hadn’t heard him approaching, but Dazai didn’t pay any further attention to him, heading for a closet instead. Chuuya watched confused as it turned out to be stuffed with clothes and Dazai pulled out a bag which he filled with shirts and some jeans.

“You have stored clothes here?” the question actually stupid because of the obvious answer, Chuuya still couldn’t hold it back. Why? At this point, many things Dazai did evoked that question in him.

“You’ve been in my flat,” Dazai replied, “You must have noticed how empty it was. I only come there to sleep; my most treasured belongings are here.”

“Why?” Chuuya had to.

“Just in case. See, it actually turned out to be reasonable.”

“You make it seem as if you have a lot of enemies that would like to do something similar to what Erebus did.”

Dazai stuffed a last sweater into the now full bag and pulled out a second one. “You don’t even want to know.”

Chuuya did, in fact. But Dazai made it quite clear that he had no interest in elaborating as he pushed the second bag into Chuuya’s hands.

“Hold that, we’ve got to take some books with us.”

“Am I your packhorse now?” Chuuya scowled as he held the bag open.

Pausing in what he did, Dazai dared to smirk at him, a mischievous glint in his eyes, “You can’t reach most of them anyway, why bother?” Then he continued picking up the books from the top shelf, not seeing the middle finger Chuuya gave him.

The bag filled quickly as Dazai put in one book after the other, each one thicker than the last one and Chuuya’s already aching shoulders weren’t amused in the slightest. Dazai picked the books from the shelves with an astonishing speed, knowing exactly where the books they needed were placed and Chuuya even didn’t have enough time to read each of their titles.

‘Demonic Languages 1.’

‘Encyclopedia of demons’

‘The Great Evil’

‘Demonic Languages 2’

‘The mastery of incantation’

And those were only a few of them, the last one barely fit into the bag.
When done, Dazai wiped his hands on his pants to get the dust off, looking around the room.

“Do we need anything else?” Chuuya asked.

“I am just thinking that it would be a good idea to bring some weapons, but I think we won’t need them anyway.”

To Chuuya, bringing weapons sounded good. If Erebus had been able to locate Dazai’s residence, what would prevent him from finding Chuuya’s? While nothing might have happened to his place for now, in the back of his mind a voice told him that they could never take safety for granted. He would feel more comfortable if they had weapons. Additionally, although he didn’t want his apartment to end up the same way as Dazai’s, he would love to see Dazai fight again. He hadn’t gotten a good look last time, too occupied with his own struggles, but he remembered how aesthetically Dazai’s back had arched and how hot he had looked with determination written all over his face.

“What do you think?” Dazai’s voice pulled Chuuya out of his thoughts and he needed a moment to sort them before answering.

“You still have the gun at my place, why don’t you bring some more bullets? As you’ve said, just in case. And if you have some more, maybe some daggers as well?”

Dazai considered the idea but quickly agreed and went for a metallic case, locked away in another cupboard, which he handed over to Chuuya.

“Your knives. Let me get the bullets, then we are good to go. We have a lot of research to do today.”

Dazai didn’t take the key with him.

*-*-*-*

Chuuya had been reading for hours, had gone through more than half of the ‘Demonic Languages 1’ book and still had not once seen symbols resembling those Erebus had used. Although Dazai had told him that he had once managed to translate some bits and pieces, he couldn’t remember which specific language had been used so all that Chuuya could do for now was to find that out. By now, he was brooding over the leather bound book without focusing on any of the words, all of them melting into a giant block of black. He needed a break.

Across him, Dazai had engrossed in a book about summoning demons, high ranking ones to be precise, and scribbled down information he deemed as useful on the notebook next to him. If Dazai was still working concentrated, he should as well and he forced himself into focus again to continue skimming through the next few pages, the pictures from the flat printed out in front of him. It worked for approximately ten pages, then the text blurred and he gave up.

While he struggled with reading the book, it turned out that his eyes had no troubles with staying on Dazai, watching him as he read paragraph after paragraph. He probably didn’t even realize how he furrowed his brows when he read over particular interesting facts or how he tucked his hair behind his ear every time it fell into his face. Just once Chuuya wanted to do it for him, to run his hands through the soft hair, to be able to grab a handful and –
“Everything alright?” Dazai looked up, tilting his head as he always did when he didn’t know what was going on.

Having his train of thoughts end abruptly, he tried to shake the feeling of heat that had been already following him around the entire day and nodded, “Yes sure, I just think I need a break.”

He didn’t see how doubtfully Dazai eyed him as he stood up from the table and went to make a cup of tea. He needed to concentrate, but he couldn’t help himself that Dazai turned out to be as much of a distraction as he was.

As he prepared a cup, his mind tried to think of anything interesting that he had seen at Dazai’s flat in order not to think about how Dazai made his breathing go flat, when he remembered something else.

“Dazai, do you know a guy named Fyodor?”

Dazai looked up from the book again, leaning back in the chair with crossed arms.

“Yes, I do. How do you know him though?”

“I met him when I was at your flat, he was looking for you. Do you want some tea too?”

Furrowing his brows, Dazai appeared to be more than confused, “No thanks. Do you know why?”

Chuuya poured hot water into the cup.

“He said he wanted to tell you that the job had gone well, or something like that.”

“Okay, interesting. Why didn’t he just call?”

“How would I know?” Chuuya retorted, a little too snappy maybe, and returned to the table with his tea. “Didn’t you say you had some ghosts-friends to help?”

“Yeah, and?”

Chuuya rolled his eyes in annoyance at the counterquestion.

“Well, then why was Fyodor there?” He knew he was being a hypocrite, having not told Dazai about Akutagawa in first place too as it wasn’t a big deal, but he hated how Dazai tried to take him for stupid and when he laughed, wholeheartedly and honestly, Chuuya needed every bit of self-control to remain fretful and not kiss him into silence.

“Fyodor is very much as dead as he possibly could be,” Dazai replied to Chuuya’s confusion.

“I didn’t see any glow around him, don’t fool me.” A scowl settled on Chuuya’s face.

“I don’t,” Dazai said and Chuuya hated himself for not hating that superior grin that tugged at his lips, “Fyodor is an abnormal ghost. He has no glow, an insanely high amount of e.m.e. and can disappear whenever he likes.”

Silently, Chuuya sat down again, propping up his head on one hand while holding the cup in the other and keeping up eye-contact with Dazai. It made sense. Fyodor had appeared so suddenly, he had believed he was the inattentive one.

Chuuya took a small sip to find out the drink was still too hot and burnt his lips.
“How do you know him?”

Dazai didn’t seem to wonder about his curiosity. “We’ve got to know each other years ago. We’re not exactly friends, but we do each other favors.” Chuuya’s interest sparked up when Dazai mentioned ‘favors’. What kind of favors? If Fyodor had a strong physical appearance, meaning he would be solid to touch, meaning he could very well –

“He’s the one who initially should jump off the high rise buildings so that I could find a partner. But some non-sighted people saw him, which ended up in a great mess.”

“Good to know.” Chuuya cut the answer short and turned his attention to the books again. Something in the way Dazai talked about Fyodor rubbed him the wrong way. He despised the fondness in Dazai’s tone that tightened his stomach.

For the next few minutes, they continued to read through the books, and Chuuya was just about to skip the last few chapters, seeing no point in continuing the search, when he noticed blue ink next to the heading.

‘Erebus native language?’

He didn’t read through the text but quickly turned to page, where a thin sheet of paper was stuck into the pleat in the middle. Pulling it out and unfolding it, he immediately recognized it as the same handwriting as on the previous page and he didn’t need to read through the first paragraph to understand what was written.

“Dazai, I think I found the language.” He held up the sheet, showing it his partner who grabbed it from his grip to read.

The corners of Dazai’s lips pulled up, “Finally you’ve made yourself useful,” the smirk, however, yielded only a second later, “That’s what I’ve translated years ago”, he muttered.

Chuuya let him read for a few seconds before gently removed the paper from Dazai’s fingers and placed it in front of himself.

“You continue looking for information, let me do this.”

At first, Dazai didn’t seem too pleased to cede the translating to Chuuya, but then he nodded and let him.

Chuuya began with writing down the letters that he found in the book as well as on the pictures of the walls, labeling them with the corresponding English letters which turned out to be more difficult than he had thought because for some English letters, three or more demonic ones were needed. Translating from English to demonic appeared impossible.

After half an hour, he had written down at least three verses, which, to his great dispair, made no sense at all.

‘Two souls, more similar than one might think,

Dancing like two marionettes,

One of which is livid to purge the other.’
If he had been able to translate the ones following, it would probably be more coherent, but right now, they were all separate. To his misfortune, the book didn’t provide a full manual for translation, as apparently the combinations varied too much.

‘And, to conclude, when the place dissolves,
Every soul shall be extracted from their shell.’

For translating more, he always lacked two or three letters that he just couldn’t identify.

‘And, in his greedy striving, he has transferred
Beyond all earth’s potentialities.’

Maybe some of the symbols on Dazai’s ribs would bring the solution? On the sheet, the translation had been written but it missed the symbols. Chuuya was almost convinced that he remembered seeing symbols on Dazai he hadn’t seen in the book yet. How had Dazai translated them back then if they weren’t findable in the book? It didn’t matter, only the progress it would bring counted.

If he wanted to use those inscriptions, he would need to see them, or even take pictures of them. Sure, Dazai had trusted him once, shown him his deepest secret and let him be the one to treat him, but asking him to let him see them again as if it was his personal right now also had a bitter aftertaste. What else should he do?

During the time Chuuya had translated the verses, Dazai had filled multiple pages with information about required skills to summon Erebus and the resources needed to do so, hoping to find a clue about the person who could have summoned him and where they had done it, but so far without any success.

“Dazai?”

“Hm?” Dazai didn’t even bother looking up from his notes, chewing on the end of his pen.

“I’m making progress here, but can I ask you something?”

“You just did.” Why must Dazai be such an attractive asshole?

“Come on,” Chuuya’s nose scrunched up in annoyance, “I actually wanted to know if I could have another look at your ribs and maybe even take a picture.”

Dazai’s eyes shot up, “Why?”

Feeling guilty instantly, Chuuya bit the inner side of his lower lip.

“I need to match some symbols, or I can’t make progress.”
Still suckling the skin on his lip, Chuuya waited as Dazai considered his request, watched him, as Dazai put his pen down and noticed, how his shoulders slumped as he sighed.

“Sure, everything if it helps.”

On the one hand, Chuuya felt uncomfortable asking this from Dazai, knowing how sensitive of a topic it was, but on the other hand, he couldn’t take his eyes off Dazai as he slid the chair back and started unbuttoning his shirt, one button after another.

Chuuya licked his teeth as slender fingers worked on the buttons, each newly opened one exposing more skin than the one prior and before he knew he stood at Dazai’s side. Dazai stopped moving and tilted his head back slightly to look Chuuya in the eye.

Gently, Chuuya’s hands replaced Dazai’s, opening the last few buttons with skilled fingers and when they touched Dazai’s skin, he sucked in air sharply. A darkness clouded Dazai’s eyes as his pupils blew wide and as he licked his lips, Chuuya’s eyes flickered down at them. The shirt open, Chuuya let his fingers graze the sensitive skin, trailing up Dazai’s chest up, over every scar, to his shoulders to push away the fabric.

Beautiful.

Hot.

Despite all the scars, the ones on his skin and the ones he carried around hidden from sight, Dazai was nothing but attractive.

The shirt dropped to the floor, leaving Dazai’s upper body covered with nothing but the bandages. Chuuya let a finger slip underneath them, tugging carefully and want gleamed in his stomach as Dazai hissed, but not in pain.

Closer. He needed to be closer to Dazai.

One leg slid over Dazai’s lap. In no time, he straddled his waist and Dazai’s hands flew to his hips in an instant, steadying him. Chuuya felt the bulge in his pants growing, but he was too occupied to care. He only saw Dazai. All he needed was Dazai.

When their lips met, a firework erupted in Chuuya’s chest. He had longed for this, wanted this. There was nothing slow or shy about the kiss, their mouths moving together confidently and eager. A hand cupped Dazai’s face, keeping him in place, and Dazai’s nails dug through the shirt into the soft skin above Chuuya’s hips, urging him to push forward and Chuuya did so with pleasure. They pushed and pulled, chasing each other’s lips so that they weren’t apart and they melted into perfect synch.

Little gasps escaped Dazai whenever Chuuya let his teeth sink into his lower lip, tugging, before licking over the irritated skin to soothe. The kiss only grew deeper and Chuuya’s heart rate picked up. This was where he needed to be.

As Chuuya’s tongue asked for entrance, liking over Dazai’s lower lip, cold hands found their way under his shirt.

The next moment, his ass met the floor.

His head throbbed, aching as if hundreds of needles were pressed into his temples and the world in front of his eyes covered in static. He barely perceived the blue glow around Dazai’s hands before he dropped back and his head hit the floor, sending another wave of pain through his skull.
He ran a hand over his face, groaning in agony.

“Fuck.”

Why was he on the floor again?

“Chuuya, can you hear me?” Dazai’s voice.

He did, loud and clear, even too loud. “Mhm.”

“God damn it. You’ve been under a spell.”

Chuuya winced at the noise, needing time to comprehend what he had said, and he let his hand slip to the side so that he could look at Dazai with one eye open. A blank face stared back at him. Why wasn’t Dazai wearing a shirt?

“A spell?” His own voice echoed inside his skull.

“Yes, the closer you got to me the colder my hands got. When I touched you, my ability erupted, nullifying the spell.”

Dazai seemed so far away.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Can you stand up?”

Chuuya opened both eyes to see Dazai’s extended hand, which he gratefully took to be pulled up. The room spun a little, but other than that, he was fine and the headache also faded out.

Dazai led him to the couch where he made him sit and handed him a blanket. He moved too fast for Chuuya; his eyes couldn’t focus yet, but something looked different about Dazai. Chuuya simply couldn’t pinpoint what.

Crouching down in front of him on the floor, Dazai handed Chuuya a cup of tea, “I knew you had gotten hits from Asmodeus, but usually they don’t convey any spells. Did you have any other contact with him? Did you find something in my flat?”

Blinking a few times, Chuuya wondered what Dazai was getting at. Why was he asking those questions? There had been one weird incident, but for him it hadn’t been significant, at least until now, maybe he needed to know that?

“When I was at your flat, I found Asmodeus head.”

“What did you do with it?”

Chuuya tried to remember as he sipped his tea. “I intended to inspect it,” he uttered the words slowly as he tried to recall if there had been anything else.

“Did you touch it?” Dazai demanded to know.

“Yeah, I did. It opened its eyes, and it was like an electric shock.”

Head falling forward, Dazai sighed loudly, and slowly Chuuya managed to collect his thoughts so far as to understand that that had been when he had gotten cursed. If it hadn’t been for Dazai’s ability, indicating the spell with coldness, who knew how long he would have wandered around
like that. Like what? How exactly had it acted?

Joints cracked as Dazai got up to collect his shirt from the ground and to dress again. “Are you good? Can I leave you for a bit?” he asked, “There’s something I have to take care of, I’ll be back in a few.”

Chuuya wanted him to stay, to come sit him with him on the couch, but the way Dazai already reached for his coat, he didn’t dare to interfere with his plans.

He accepted the others department without objection, “I’ll come round. Maybe I work something out. There’s a spare key in the cupboard, take it.”

Dazai did and the door shut behind him without as much as a word and Chuuya wished he knew the reason for his sudden department. He hadn’t said a lot after Chuuya had found himself on the ground. Why had he been on the floor in first place? Something had been different about Dazai – he had been more distant, colder than usual, especially when considering last evening. Both hands closed tightly around the warm mug.

Dazai had appeared different look-wise. For instance, he wore no shirt, which was odd in first place. Then, his eyes had been different, darker, glossier. Had he cried? No, they hadn’t been puffy or red, other than his cheeks that had been flush.

What had happened before he had fallen? He remembered that they were mulling over the books and Chuuya had asked him about Fyodor. Later, he had found a way of translating the symbols and then he… he wanted to take pictures of Dazai’s ribs. Was this the reason he had been shirtless? But why had his lips been so swollen?

The memories of what had happened minutes ago flashed up in front of his eyes like a camera roll.

They had kissed.

He had kissed Dazai.

Why hadn’t Dazai told him?

He put the cup on the table and sank deeper into the cushions. He had fucked up. This was not supposed to happen. What in hell had gotten into him to kiss Dazai? A spell. It all happened because he had been cursed by the demon prince of lust even after its demise and not out of free will. Chuuya didn’t know if it made things better or worse.

Of course he could drop the topic, blaming the demon for the incident and refuse to think of it again, because there wasn’t more to it. He had been urged to find Dazai attractive, to want him. It hadn’t been his own choice but Asmodeus’. It could have been so easy.

But why did the fluttering in his belly stay? Why did his heart rate pick up with excitement at every thought about Dazai? Why couldn’t he suppress a smile when his fingers traced a sore spot on his lips where Dazai had bit especially hard?

He remembered to have enjoyed the kiss. He had wanted it so badly and getting it was the best reward he could have gotten. But how could he be sure that these were his own emotions? Of course he had wanted and enjoyed it, which was the goal of the curse.

Wrapping the blanket tighter around himself, he pulled his legs up to rest his head on his knees, hugging himself. He had been so stupid, should have known that touching that damn thing would do no good. This mess wouldn’t have happened then.
Dazai wouldn’t have left and they would be fine. Chuuya didn’t even know if Dazai was angry at him or even liked him anymore. What if he had forced Dazai into the kiss, giving him the feeling that he owed him at least so much? No matter what Dazai thought of him now, Chuuya couldn’t blame him.

Yes, he had been cursed, but thinking it through, there had to be a reason why Chuuya had been attracted solely to Dazai. Maybe Dazai now believed Chuuya had actual feelings for him which was absolutely n–true.

A silent sob shook Chuuya’s body. The longer he tried to wrap his head around the whole situation, the more confusing it got. He had no idea how much of the emotions truly belonged to him, feeling invaded and robbed of a choice while at the same time, he didn’t know if the feelings he had now had been influenced by Asmodeus’ curse or were really his own.

The only thing he knew for certain: he liked Dazai, more than he probably should, and the realization sent another shiver through his body.

Never before in his life had he been as uncertain about a situation as he was about the current. Not when his parents had died. Not when he had been on the brink of death. Not when he had handed over the company. Not when he had been in police custody for the first time. Hell, not even when he had found about this entire ghost-thing.

Because this time, nobody could help him out. This struggle he had to battle on his own.

His mind kept racing, punching thoughts from left to right and back again, trying to come up with a way to solve this mess.

He needed to talk to Dazai. He needed to apologize, tell him he didn’t mean to offend him and maybe they could continue working on the case again. After all, Erebus presence concerned the population of the entire city.

However, Dazai had left. All Chuuya could do was to call him.

He tried four times, but each time he got forwarded to voicemail.

Sitting down at the kitchen table again, he made a decision; he would translate as much as he could, looking for any clues. If it had to be, then he would do it without Dazai. Dazai would return eventually, or he wouldn’t have taken the key, Chuuya was sure of that and until then, Chuuya could at least do something productive, if only to put his mind off.

Chapter End Notes

I have no regrets...

Thank you for reading and feel free to leave your opinion in the comments!
Hello again! Today’s update comes a little early but as I don’t know when I will be able to post then... here it is!
I hope you all had a great start into the new year <3
As always, thank you for your support! It's greatly appreciated!

TW: blood, gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few hours, he translated as much as he could without the help of the symbols on Dazai. Some phrases he could derive from Dazai’s translation and some words he had to guess. The more often he read the translation though, the worse he felt. By the fifth time, he wanted to gag.

The words directed against Dazai, about his allegedly non-existent worth and how he didn’t deserve to live as a human, his soul belonging into Erebus’ hands. One paragraph only existed with the sole purpose of mocking Dazai and reminding him of his past, as far as Chuuya understood.

Only the first few sentences had been translated by Dazai, each word shakier than the last and it stopped in the middle of a sentence, a streak of ink the last what had been written as if Dazai’s hand had slipped.

‘Death, once believed to be so strong, yielded to my form

And when I rose, the bugs crawled at my feet.

Their minds too weak, they screamed in horror,

Their sole mistake lay in believing that

A mere human could hold me.

One by one

Three at a time

A flood caught out the temple

Promised them their reward when they died,

And left them suitably edified.’

What had Dazai witnessed?

All in all, it translated into some words of hatred and destruction of the world, just as one would
imagine a demonic inscription to be like. Not every sentence sounded correct, but Chuuya believed he had at least gotten the gist of its meaning. Some of them, however, stood out.

‘Through gates of servility you’ll pass
To the Temple of Certainty’

This was the first and only time Chuuya found a mentioning of a place, even though he had no idea what this place should be.

‘We’ll just rip the air wide apart,
Then through the air we’ll take our course’

To him, this sounded religious, similar to the temple, and so far it was the only clue he had, until his eyes caught on something.

Temple. It got mentioned twice, once referring to Dazai’s past, once to the most recent incidents. That couldn’t be a coincidence. Trying to find another piece of text that would give him hints about a special location, he scrambled through the stack of notes he had made but phrases about ‘arms holding up the sky’ and ‘stains to follow in the dark’ didn’t quite help him.

Chuuya stretched out a hand and pulled the notes Dazai had taken closer but not without a pinch in his heart– maybe he could gain some useful knowledge from them.

He found out that binding a demon prince needed a lot of power, mental and physical. Despite that, a row of rituals and actions Chuuya did not approve of had to be acted out and what was worst; you needed human blood. A lot of it.

Further, the place had to be chosen carefully. The closer to hell the better and Dazai had made a note next to the information: ‘underground?’ which made sense, if hell really existed in the depths of this earth.

That temple had to mean something, especially if it connected to Dazai’s past. Of course there was the Portland Oregon Temple but Chuuya ruled it out immediately. A tourist attraction was not what he was looking for, but a place that connected deeper to Dazai. Maybe he had been there before? But Dazai wasn’t here to ask him. Chuuya tried calling again, but not much to his surprise, nobody answered.

In actuality, he knew close to nothing about Dazai’s past that exceeded his involvement with the police department, and while Dazai trusted Chuuya, or at least had trusted, Dazai had never talked about his childhood. They had never even grazed the topic. However, other people knew Dazai longer than he did, maybe they knew something. It was the best shot he had.

He called every one he had met that one night in the bar. Atsushi and Gin weren’t much of a help, only suggesting the Oregon Temple. Atsushi also asked how Dazai was and if he was around as well, and Chuuya ended the call as quickly as he could without giving away that something had
happened. For now, it was only his and Dazai’s to deal with.

The phone rang twice before Yosano picked up.

“Akiko Yosano.”

“Hey, Yosano, it’s Chuuya.”

“What a surprise, haven’t heard from you in a long time! How are you?” Yosano seemed actually happy to hear from him, not having been in touch since the bar night, and while Chuuya loved to talk to her he couldn’t afford to get distracted now.

“I am sorry to call you out of a sudden, but I’m currently I’m on the track of something and need answers.”

“From me?” Skepticism colored her voice.

“I have some questions.” From somewhere distant Chuuya heard a voice through the phone.

“Ranpo wants to hear too, can he listen?” Yosano asked.

The question why Ranpo was with Yosano flashed through his mind briefly, but the answer not vital to him, he simply agreed and was put on speaker. He had intended to call him later as well, which he could now skip.

“Chuuya, where’s Dazai?” Of all the things Ranpo could have said, asking for Dazai was the first thing he did, giving Chuuya the impression that he already knew something was amiss.

“I don’t know”, Chuuya answered honestly, “not with me, but he should be back soon.”

“Thought so,” Ranpo said, “has something happened? He hasn’t been on his phone for a while now.”

The information nothing new to Chuuya, as Dazai’s phone appeared to be turned off, he hummed in thought, “We’re alright. He told me he needed to take care of something. But I still have to ask you a question.” Wait. How did Ranpo know?

“Spill it,” Yosano said.

Her demand interrupted his trail of thoughts and he refocused on his initial mission. “Do you know anything about Dazai’s past?”

Nobody answered at first, and the seconds of silence dragged like minutes until Yosano spoke. “I have only met him when Kunikida introduced him to me. He isn’t very open about what he did before. I’m sorry, I don’t think I can help you here. Why do you ask?”

“Dazai’s not available and I urgently need the information. I have a lead to a case. Ranpo, how about you?” Chuuya asked, growing impatient.

The way Ranpo countered exposed that Chuuya finally hit the right track.

“What in particular do you want to know?”

Chuuya paused. If Ranpo knew, he had the opportunity to ask everything. Where Dazai had been raised, what he had worked as before, and maybe Ranpo would have an answer. But he held back. Sure, Ranpo would give him the information if he claimed it was important. However, what would
Dazai say? He had always been secretive, never even hinting at his childhood. Only yesterday he had opened up, giving Chuuya a look inside and if he had come this far, he would surely tell him more sooner or later. It needed time.

He didn’t want to risk Dazai feeling betrayed. Chuuya had intruded his privacy enough. Therefore, Chuuya stuck to his original question.

“Do you know if he has ever had a deal with a temple?”

“A temple? A religious one?”

Chuuya shrugged, not recalling that they were on the phone and nobody could see him.

“Maybe? Just any kind of temple.”

“It seems to me he has at a younger age, when his parents were still alive, but I couldn’t tell which one.”

While it affirmed his assumptions, it didn’t help him a lot. He had hoped that somebody would tell him a specific place. What now? He didn’t know any more of Dazai’s friends and subsequently had nobody else to ask. Damn it, did Dazai even have more friends except for his ‘ghost-friends’ as he always called them?

Ghost-friends.

He had met one of those before, which brought a new thought on. “Okay, thanks. One last thing; Do you know a Fyodor?”

“Fyodor Dostoevsky?” Yosano’s tone changed. Chuuya could practically hear how she scrunched up her nose in disgust. It didn’t lessen his excitement though.

“Yes, that one!”

Yosano cleared her throat before replying, “Yes, he’s one of Dazai’s acquaintances.”

“Do you know how I can reach him?”

The answer came hesitantly, accompanied by a sigh. “I have his phone number, got it when he brought me a corpse.”

Chuuya frowned. He didn’t even want to know why somebody would carry a corpse around.

“Can you pass it on to me?”

“Chuuya, what are you intending to do with it?” Sounding seriously concerned, Chuuya rolled his eyes, now glad she couldn’t see him.

“I can’t, but I promise it won’t harm anybody. I just have to talk to him.”

A few seconds passed without a word. Then he heard Ranpo whispering, too silently for him to understand, before a reply followed. “Okay, I’m taking you word. I’ll text you the number. But please, stay safe. You shouldn’t mess around with that guy, he’s not as nice as it seems.” She made a point of emphasizing her words.

He knew that. The impression Fyodor had left last time still sent a shiver down his spine, but at the same time, he thought she was overreacting. He was dead and he had helped them just a few days
ago. Chuuya saw no reason for her unease.

“I know, I’m good. Thank you, you two.”

The call ended and only a few seconds later, he received a message including a phone number.

He really was going to call a ghost — a story he could never tell because nobody, not even the sighted, would believe him.

Laughing dryly to himself, he pressed on the number.

“Hello, who’s there?” a voice with Russian accent picked up and Chuuya immediately identified it as Fyodor’s.

“Hello, this is Chuuya. I got your number from a friend, I need to ask you something.” He could only hope he didn’t sound as unsure as he felt. Calling a friend of Dazai without him knowing left Chuuya feeling as if he intruded Dazai’s privacy, again. He was doing that quite a lot these days. But what else should he do?

“I know your voice. Have we met before?” the tone in which he spoke, inquiring and demanding simultaneously, made Chuuya wary, despite the innocent question. A quiet voice in the back of his head claimed that Yosano might have indeed been right. He pushed it aside, collecting himself to reply.

“Yeah, we’ve met in front of Dazai’s apartment. You asked me if I knew where he was.”

“I see. Do you know now?” Chuuya heard him smiling. Did he know he had lied yesterday?

“No”, this time, it wasn’t a lie.

“Alright. How can I help you?”

A silent sigh escaped Chuuya’s lips. Apparently he had been convincing enough.

“You are a friend of Dazai, right? Do you know anything about his past, his childhood?

“Even if I did indeed, why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Chuuya bit down onto his lip. “I can’t right now, but this is very important, your choice if you believe me. I just need to know one little detail. Has he ever been involved with a temple?”

He got straight to the point. The guy put his nerves on the edge without a reason and the sooner the call ended the better.

“Yes, he has.”

“Do you know which one?”

“There’s an old, abandoned temple in the periphery of Portland. I am almost sure it was that one.” That’s exactly what he needed to know! Now he could continue his investigations and maybe he would find a real lead on Erebus. Suddenly, the end of this seemed so near.

“Do you know where exactly?”

“I can show you, if you want,” Fyodor replied.
Surprised by the offer, Chuuya contemplated it, but the suspicious feeling that had settled remained. Why would Fyodor help him just like that?

“I don’t know, I don’t want to bother you.”

“No, please, a friend of Dazai is mine too. You surely know about my nature; I am bored anyway. Let me help you.”

Having somebody giving him directions would shorten the drive by far and maybe Fyodor could tell him a little more about the temple when they were there. And even if he tried anything, Chuuya still had his ability. What could go wrong?

“Okay. I can pick you up. Where?”

“I am waiting at Couch Park.”

*_**_**_

Chuuya spotted Fyodor from afar when driving down the road, his white clothes sticking out against the green trees. Pulling the car to the side of the road, he stopped and Fyodor slid into the seat quickly so that Chuuya could get driving again, not holding up the traffic.

“Nice to meet you properly this time, Chuuya.”

Chuuya didn’t get to have a proper look at him, needing to concentrate on the street, but from the corner of his eyes he administered Fyodor’s solid form without any of the sheerness most ghosts usually possessed.

“My pleasure. Thank you for helping me.”

Fyodor crossed his legs in front of him, stretching them into the large foot space of the car. “I had nothing to do, a trip sounded nice. Am I right to believe this has to do with one of Dazai’s cases?”

“Yes. Dazai’s currently preoccupied and to make progress I need to see the temple.”

“Interesting. Has it to do with the last one? The one where I prepared the car crash?”

Chuuya slowed the car down and stopped in front of a red light, the pause giving him the opportunity to look at Fyodor and to make eye-contact. Yes, perfectly human. He would have never guessed that the man had already died. Fyodor tilted his head to the side as he waited for a reply and Chuuya nodded. “Yes, we have reason to believe that more demons were involved than we first believed.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Everything I can find.”

During the ride Fyodor continued to ask some questions about him and how working with Dazai was. In exchange, he told Chuuya some fun stories about how he had helped Dazai in the past, drawing some laughs from Chuuya when he recounted how he had jumped off the building and three people called an ambulance to have them arrive to nothing but air.
When they left the city behind them, the small talk ebbed away and silence fell between them, only interrupted by a few directions Fyodor gave. Chuuya seized the opportunity to sort his thoughts and he noticed that he had let most of his guard down around Fyodor, having talked and laughed freely as if they hadn’t only met today. The realization had his shoulders tense up and the unsettling feeling he initially had around him returned when he felt Fyodor’s piercing stare on him, as if he searched for something particular on him. What was he up to?

The weight of daggers inside his jacket and on his belts offered some security at least.

“Turn left, then it should be right ahead.”

Chuuya did as ordered. In front of him an ancient building soared into the sky and the walls made of sand colored stone and several domes on top didn’t fit against the deep green forest behind it, looking out of place. Parking the car, it’s true size astonished Chuuya and he couldn’t help but find this place miraculous. Why had such a beautiful place gotten abandoned?

“Not what you have expected?” Fyodor made no sounds as he walked.

“Not at all.”

When Chuuya went ahead to enter, his phone chimed in his pocket. For a brief moment, he considered ignoring it, but what if Dazai had texted him? Hasty fingers pulled it out of the jeans and unlocked the screen, but it had only been Akutagawa. The burst of excitement turned into disappointment that poked into his heart.

Akutagawa

[3:11 pm] Have time to tell me what happened?
    I’m free this evening.

Chuuya

[3:12 pm] sorry, can’t.
    Currently at a forest temple, having a lead.

He quickly typed the reply before putting the device in flight mode and pocketing it again to avoid any more distractions. Fyodor had already walked up the stairs leading to the entrance and waited at the closed double winged door for him. Chuuya took two steps at a time.

Dust paired with humid air made him sneeze several times before he could take in the high ceilings that awaited him in the foyer. He vaguely noticed how Fyodor smiled at him. So far, the building gave off the impression of what it was; an abandoned temple and nothing more.

“If you find something that looks out of place, tell me,” Chuuya said before he left Fyodor alone and strode into the main hall, where pillars formed an avenue to the front. Once, everything must have been glorious; the gold ornaments shining and the impressive mosaic on the ground clearly visible rather than covered by dust. Now, the picture triggered sadness.

From somewhere a cold draught hit Chuuya, who closed his jacket to keep himself warm.
Admittedly, the place was still impressive and definitely an unusual sight, descending from another culture, but no matter how hard he searched, nothing seemed relevant to the case; not the old book on the altar with yellowed corners and faded words, not the rusty goblets in the back room and neither did the pictures on the wall, even if they did at first glance. In reality, they just portrayed gods and goddesses Chuuya didn’t recognize. He looked into every corner and behind every shelf in hope of finding a hidden door; however, in vain.

His footsteps echoed through the empty hall as he walked back to the front door, just in time to see Fyodor stepping down the stair that lead upstairs.

“Did you find anything?” Chuuya asked.

Fyodor shook his head, long black hair swishing left to right, “No, nothing, except for some inappropriate graffiti. You?”

“No. But I haven’t finished looking around. There’s another room at the end of the hall. And somewhere must be a basement.”

“I’ll come with you, maybe together we see more. If Erebus had been here, he must have left some traces.”

Chuuya trailed after Fyodor, following him into the back room.

Together they inspected the storage room down the hall where everything had been scattered over the floor as if people had already taken apart the place once. Beneath some cans he found an old Bible and rolls of parchment, but he didn’t understand a word, the language unfamiliar to him.

“Can you read this?” Chuuya handed the roll to Fyodor, who inspected it rigorously before handing it back.

“No, not my language.”

“Thought so.”

They continued rummaging through the junk and to be honest; when he had picked up Fyodor, Chuuya hadn’t anticipated him to be of so much help. He picked up everything he could grasp and twisted and turned it until he was sure not to have missed anything and he worked his way through the garbage in an amazing speed. Chuuya hardly kept up with him.

In the end, however, they found nothing in there, which left the basement for inspection. The light in the temple had been dim when they had arrived, but as the sun went down, almost no light came through the dirty windows, and Chuuya pulled out his phone to use the flashlight.

The entrance hidden behind another door, Chuuya had almost missed it if Fyodor hadn’t shown it to him. Scratching the floor as it opened, the door screeched and Chuuya flinched at the unexpected noise.

He had opened a way into the void, pitch black darkness greeting him.

“Do you really intend to go there?” Fyodor asked, lips pursed.

“Yeah, I want to check it real quick. Leave the door open, or it might shut.”

Chuuya had never been afraid of darkness, not even as a child. But the narrow staircase, combined with the limited sight as the flashlight only managed to illuminate the next few steps had his heart
rate accelerate. He wiped the sweat off his hands in order to have a better grip around his phone. He just needed to have a quick look, nothing more. Further, he wasn’t alone, Fyodor was with him.

He descended the stairs.

The lower he got, the colder the air around him grew. Dirt crunched under his shoes and he ran into a spider’s web that then clung to his jacket. He didn’t turn around but only walked forward, deeper into the darkness. A familiar smell hit his nose. Irony and stronger than anything he had ever smelled but nonetheless the same as it has always been. Blood.

As the realization hit him, something else came to his mind.

Fyodor had talked about Erebus minutes prior, but he hadn’t mentioned the demon at all.

He turned on his heels, raising his flashlight, but the door was already closed, Fyodor nowhere in sight. How had he not heard?

“Damn it!” he swore, kicking the upper stair.

Stupid. He had been stupid enough to trust Fyodor, had ignored the alarming feeling in his guts and Yosano’s advice. Despite already knowing the outcome, he sprinted up and slammed into the door which didn’t bulge, just as he had feared. Heat rose into his face as he gritted his teeth too firmly, anger overwhelming him.

Fyodor that asshole. What was his plan?

There was one way to find out – getting to know what lurked down there. Any fear he had felt vanished, fury taking its place. If Fyodor wanted to play dirty games then Chuuya was on, and he would win. He had an ace up in his sleeve.

Any prior caution forgotten, he hurried down the steps as fast as he could without slipping, and the bloody stench increased but had no impact on Chuuya anymore, more pressing matters racing through his mind. What would await him downstairs? The last step led into a sea of blood, his shoes sinking into the fluid until it almost flowed into his shoes, and in the light of the flashlight his figure reflected in there.

He didn’t get to pivot the flashlight, because with a snapping sound, torches lit up around the entire room, fire cracking and showing the extent of the scene.

The by now well-known symbols on the walls, the altar in the middle, the pentagram on the rise, the bodies lying in their own blood – he recognized it all from Dazai’s notes and nothing had been left out.

Chuuya gulped, but his throat was dry.

He knew exactly what this was.

The now evident smell of putrefaction made tears well up in his eyes, the stench so sharp. Chuuya had wanted to find clues about Erebus whereabouts, but had he known he would stumble across the very place of Erebus summoning, he wouldn’t have gone without Dazai, not in his wildest dreams. Yet, here he was.

He couldn’t turn back, the exit barred, but maybe he could find a back door. Maybe he had enough time to find another way out - there had to be one; as big as the place was one exit would have never sufficed. Slowly, he waded through the blood, the liquid stickier and more viscous than
water, and he despised the sound he made when pulling his foot out and how it flowed into his shoes. So far, nobody else, except for the corpses, seemed to be around.

“Going anywhere?”

Chuuya stopped, back straight, and he balled his hands into fists. Apparently, Fyodor had slipped past him with his power of invisibility. He turned to face him, fueled with anger, “I’m getting out.”

Fyodor scoffed, “But little, how are you planning on doing so? You must have realized that you are locked in,” and Chuuya’s neck spotted red in irritation.

Red light appeared around his hands, pulsating angrily. He knew exactly what he would do.

Fyodor chuckled, hiding the smile behind his hand, “This might work for a moment, and you might be strong, but you won’t be able to do much with that.”

The first ball was hurled at Fyodor and hit his target right into the chest, sending him against the next wall, and if Fyodor hadn’t been dead already, several bones would have broken and Chuuya wished he could have heard that satisfying crack. A second orb followed right after and punched Fyodor into his lower stomach causing him to bend over in pain, wrapping his hands around his middle.

“Are you sure about that?” The grin that spread over Chuuya’s face so that his teeth showed conveyed every bit of the satisfaction that bringing Fyodor to his knees brought him. One final strike, in his knees, and Fyodor was on the ground, groaning in pain.

Chuuya had more power than Fyodor had believed and now it paid back. Maybe he could escape now; with Fyodor too injured to move he had bought some time. Maybe there was an exit at the other side. He just had to get there.

A surge of blood built up like a wall in front of his face and Chuuya stumbled backwards in surprise, tripping over something and fell into the stale blood, catching himself with his lower arms. Lowering his gaze, he saw that he had tripped over a severed arm and in any other situation he would have been disgusted, but a loud roar demanded his attention.

The surge lowered, the blood flowed back to its normal level and behind the walls a figure emerged, tall and armored and surrounded by black smoke so thick, Chuuya had almost overseen the black wings folded behind his back. As fast as he could, Chuuya scrambled onto his feet again, red already enclosing him when a deep, growl-like laugh echoed through the basement.

“Chuuya, you’ve been a great surprise. Who would have thought someone like you could take it up with my dear Asmodeus.”

The glow increased, Chuuya’s lips pulled back into a feral snarl. “What do you want?”

The demon didn’t answer his question, “And there you hurt my master mind. You can’t kill him yet, I will need him a little longer.”

“I’m fine”, Fyodor had gotten onto his feet again but still relied on the wall to stand. Chuuya didn’t let his gaze linger on him. The real threat was Erebus.

“What do you want?” Chuuya repeated.

“You are keeping something that’s mine. I can’t allow you to stay around him any longer.”
Black arrows were shot at Chuuya whose e.m.e.-shield built up in the last moment. They floated right in front of Chuuya’s eyes. It was a set up. They had planned it out before Chuuya had even had the chance to consider the possibility of an ambush.

The arrows turned around, enveloped in red, and fired back at the demon, causing Chuuya’s eyes to widen as he watched the body absorb them. Shit, that wouldn’t work.

He followed Erebus’ every movement, waiting for the next strike, but the demon didn’t move. Instead, it expanded; growing bigger in size gradually and its skin ripped open to reveal dark flames beneath. If the sight hadn’t paralyzed him, Chuuya would have moved. Only Fyodor’s voice brought him back.

“I understand now how you have been able to defeat Asmodeus. You are truly stronger than you look like. But without Dazai, you have no chance against the king. It’s time to get you out of the way.”

Chuuya’s gaze flickered to where Fyodor stood; holding his stomach with one arm and grinning at him - mocking him. What was that asshole thinking? Chuuya wanted him to be silent. To shut up. To never hear his voice again.

Remembering the weapons, he pulled a dagger out of his jacket and the next second, it cut right through his shoulder and through the wall behind him, pinning him in place.

A second one followed.

The ghost roared in agony - the sound echoed in Chuuya’s head distractingly. One orb of his ability hit Fyodor right at the head, but Chuuya didn’t get to see its impact - flames shot through the gashes in Erebus body and for the first time in his life, Chuuya felt small. The flash of brightness blinded him. The demon’s growl got right under his skin and tore through the abilities shield, weakening it briefly.

A jump to the side was all that prevented a blot of fire from hitting him. Instead it collided with a pillar. At the impact, the whole hall vibrated but Chuuya had no time to worry about the structure. He struggled to build his shield back up.

The strikes came fast, but not unexpected. Chuuya had to block one after another, each one more intense as the one before. He had no time to fire back, he barely managed to protect himself. But the shield wouldn’t last forever. He felt the power draining and if he collapsed, it would be his demise.

No. He wouldn’t die here. He wouldn’t let himself be consumed by the hellish flames. He still had a mission to fulfill, for Dazai’s sake. If he defeated Erebus now, Dazai would be free. Free from the spell, free from the haunting, free from the ever-present burden on his mind. It was the least he could do.

Anger fueled his power. Determination refocused the ability. He might be on his own, but not ever would he go down without a fight.

The more attacks Erebus started, the more extra-mundane energy filled the room, thickening the air and Chuuya could feel its presence tickling his skin, despite the shield. It would be his to control, it wasn’t to weaken. It belonged to him, run through his veins.

Erebus came closer gradually, pushing Chuuya back and closer to the wall behind him. Soon he would be trapped against the stones if he didn’t act now.
The rush of energy in his arms expanded to his upper half, then into his legs and the brightness the red provided increased. He needed to focus. Needed to focus on all the energy he could hold.

Black in midst the red. The energy was his to control.

He started moving. How quick, how forcefully, he didn’t know. He felt hot. His skin was burning.

An explosion. More heat, more energy, more power in his hands.

Silence. Was there a voice? Voices?

All Chuuya could see was red. Was he seeing anything at all?

Pain.

Had he been hit? What hurt? Everything.

Blue.

A numbing coldness overwhelmed him. His body went rigid as the pain seemed to multiply, before his vision went entirely black.

*_*_*_*_*

A whirl of red and black shot back and forth, up and down and engulfed everything in its way. Not a single shred of light could pass through the mass of corruption that took in the space. It consisted solely of light and energy, shredding any obstacles and ripping them into thousands of pieces. Passing right through the demon’s core, it left a gaping hole and the creature screeched and screamed so loudly, it made the walls shudder.

Erebus growled and fire lashed out at the indescribable sphere, however, red moved too fast. When the flames were ready to hit, the mass had already cut through the demon’s arm. A second later the second arm fell into the sea of blood.

Suddenly, the orb stopped, floating in the air, high above the demon’s head and in its middle another, much brighter sphere formed. Hurled at the demon, it hit where it should and tore the skull apart.

Within a second, smoke emerged and the demon dissolved into thin air as if it had never been there, leaving behind only a black spot where he had stood. Erebus wasn’t defeated, but so severely breached, it had to retreat to regain strength. A smell of ashes and burning soil filled the air.

The picture had burnt into Dazai’s mind.

But the realization that the destroying force was Chuuya, his silhouette merely visible in the brightness that was his ability, terrified him. Only when he noticed how Chuuya went on raging, how red continued to expand and the temperature in the room rose significantly, Dazai understood that he wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t, as his ability threatened to consume him as a whole and Dazai was on the verge of losing the person having grown most important to him over the last few weeks.

That couldn’t happen. He couldn’t let that happen.
But Chuuya was so far away, unreachable – mentally and physically.

While beads of sweat formed on his forehead, Dazai hands had never felt as cold as they did when watching Chuuya raging, his ability reacting ferociously to the high amount of demonic energy in the room. He didn’t have to look to know that his fingers had long turned blue, although he couldn’t care less about it when he needed a plan to bring Chuuya back.

Dazai was well aware that the light enclosed a human being, yet he wasn’t convinced that Chuuya was still able to distinct humans from demons. A nagging voice in the back of his head told him to run before he would be consumed as well.

How could he leave now?

A blue glow fought its way to the surface, giving in to the pull of demonic energy that still lingered despite its source being gone.

Then it dawned on Dazai. The source was gone, yet the energy was not because Chuuya controlled it. His ability retained and formed it to its liking and now it didn’t know another way than forward, sucking every trace of e.m.e out of the air to contribute to the corruption. But if e.m.e. surrounded Chuuya, then it should be revocable with Dazai’s ability.

Dazai gnawed on the inner side of his cheeks until he drew blood, angry with himself for not having thought of it sooner, the solution suddenly so obvious. Now he only needed to touch the still moving orb, floating close to the ceiling.

“Chuuya, can you hear me?” voice filled with desperation and concern, he hoped Chuuya would get down, but he called out to no avail, though he did move slower, showing the least amount of recognition. Chuuya wasn’t gone yet.

Gritting his teeth, Dazai hectically looked around in search for anything that would help him.

“Dazai, is everything alright down there, I heard –“ Akutagawa’s jaw dropped at the sight of the red light, having come down the stairs with a whimpering demonic dog next to him. The sound sparked an idea. It might be a reach, but everything was worth a try.

He swirled around, daring to turn his back to what remained of Chuuya with an unpleasant tug in his belly.

“Akutagawa, send Rashoumon forward!”

The demand startled Akutagawa who needed a moment to grasp what Dazai asked for. “What? Why!”

“Just do it!”

If it hadn’t been for the urgency in Dazai’s tone, along with the threatening growl he uttered, Akutagawa wouldn’t have reacted so promptly, a hand gesture being enough to have the small demon bolt into the room without second thought. What an obedient, foolish thing.

Nevertheless, Dazai’s theory proved to be right. Quicker than anyone could blink, the floating orb aimed for the demonic dog and a sharp tug of pain shot through Dazai’s ribs as he bolted forward, almost stumbling over his own feet, and reached for Chuuya inside the light. His hand found grip on Chuuya’s shoulder.

Blue collided with red, coloring the room in bright violet. Then, everything collapsed; the light,
Dazai, Chuuya, everything went dark.

Blood seeped through Dazai’s pants, filled his shoes and Chuuya left smears of foreign and own blood on Dazai’s shirt as he was cradled in his arms.

All that mattered was that he was still alive and Dazai would never let this happen again.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
I hope the chapter is satisfactory, I just couldn't end with a massive cliffhanger, I am not that cruel. Also, what do you think about Fyodor in this game? Let me hear your thoughts :3
Little side note: I have an Instagram now, where you can reach me and most likely follow my writing progress. I am more active there (online daily) so if anyone wants to hit me up, go for it! I'd love to talk to my readers!
Fenriel's Instagram
First of all, thank you so much for over 2,000 hits, and 160 kudos! That's insane! I've never thought this fic would find so many interested readers, I am beyond grateful <3 We are nearing the end quite fast right now, aren't we? Enjoy the new chapter! <3

The ride to the police department was a blur, his sole focus on the unconscious bundle in his lap that was Chuuya, a mop of red, blood-soaked hair resting on his thighs. Akutagawa hadn’t gone with them but instead decided to take care of informing Portland PD. Usually Dazai would have advised him against doing so but if he felt the need to do so, he could. Dazai’s priorities lay elsewhere.

He heard Atsushi in the front trying to comfort him with reassuring words about Yosano being informed and how she would take care of Chuuya.

Ignorant fool. How could he be so sure if they didn’t even know where exactly Chuuya’s injuries originated from? Yosano’s ability allowed her to fix injuries caused by extra-mundane energy, but what if it wouldn’t be the case now? What if that was something that wouldn’t allow anybody to make this right again?

Open gashes stretched across Chuuya’s jaw. Beads of blood continued to drip down and trickled away into the fabric of Dazai’s coat. Not that it made any difference - it had changed color from beige to a reddish brown.

With a thumb, Dazai wiped away traces of red just so new blood could dribble down.

Under layers of clothing the wounds had bled enough to have soaked every item of clothing Chuuya wore. Dazai would burn them later.

Dazai had seen a lot of gruesome things in his life. He had seen strangers being ripped in half, had seen friends descending into madness, had seen his family die. But he couldn’t remember one single incident when he had felt like he did now; his chest tight, his heart clenching and his fingers trembling uncontrollably. His body forbade taking regular breaths, his lungs not allowing enough air to fill them.

Chuuya couldn’t die on him. Not now.

Doubts and thoughts of fear took up Dazai’s entire mind until they rushed into the pathology of Portland PD, where Yosano and Ranpo already awaited them. At the sight of Chuuya in Dazai’s arms both of them cursed. The blood stream flowing out of his nostrils and gashes had yet to stop and dark blue bruises spread on the visible skin. It looked terrifying.

Yosano practically ripped Chuuya out of Dazai’s grasp, losing no time before shooing everyone out of the room. She didn’t ask what had happened, her only objective saving Chuuya.
Putting up a fight, holding tightly onto his partner, Dazai protested and insisted on staying during the treatment, but Ranpo pulled him out with him and the door closed. Dazai felt guilty for leaving Chuuya alone.

Now, Ranpo, Atsushi and he waited outside, none of them really knowing what to do or to say or if they should do anything at all. They occupied the chairs in the soulless hallway, except for Dazai who couldn’t stop pacing. Sitting seemed to make time pass by slower and he needed something to occupy himself with. He felt useless.

Nothing the others said reached his ears. His mind was fogged.

His fingers still trembled in the pockets of his coat and he itched to have them doing something. After making a beeline to Yosano’s office he returned to the hall as quickly as possible, wanting to be there when the door opened again, in fresh clothes and with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter he kept hidden in one of her desk drawers. Past-Dazai had apparently known he would need them some day.

He didn’t notice Atsushi staring while he inhaled the smoke deeply into his lungs, just to cough. Even now his lungs refused to function normally, too tight from worry, but at least the taste covered the smell of sanitizer.

“They won’t help anything, you know?” Atsushi mumbled, trying too hard to avoid Dazai’s glare.

Dazai scowled. “As if I don’t know that. But apparently I can’t help either so mind you own business.”

Maybe he was being too harsh with the young officer but he really shouldn’t stick his nose into things that weren’t his deal.

How much time had passed since Yosano had begun the treatment? Wasn’t she taking a little bit too much time? He couldn’t remember the ordeal to take so long. What if it wasn’t working?

Ranpo crouched on one of the stools and his eyes followed Dazai up and down the hallway who occasionally flicked the access of the cigarette out of a tilted window.

“Why did you leave him alone?”

The question had Dazai’s breath stop. He froze in place, lowering the cigarette to glower at Ranpo.

“Do you really think I would have let him go there on his own if I had known what he was up to?” The words carried a deep growl that would have made anyone else back up; Atsushi appeared to want to disperse on the spot. However, Ranpo had always been immune to that. He didn’t back up, instead he leaned closer to Dazai, unimpressed and almost bored.

“I know, but it’s not what I asked. You weren’t with him when he decided to act. Why did you leave?”

Of course Ranpo caught up. What did Ranpo not know? The guy was literally known for knowing things others did not. Trying to deny anything would be useless but Dazai couldn’t put it into words. Should he tell him the truth that he had not come to terms with yet?

“He was with Akutagawa and me. He needed to know about the missing people and about Rashoumon,” Atsushi said, trying to put some of Ranpo’s attention onto him, unsuccessfully. He wasn’t the only one uncomfortable in that situation.
It had Dazai listen up, “He called you and you didn’t care to tell me?” but his agitation got ignored. Instead, Ranpo scrutinized him over the edge of his glasses.

“I have figured as much, but I want him to tell me why he left him alone in first place. Not that I don’t have an idea.”

Dazai’s scowl deepened. The cigarette had burnt down by now.

“If you already know, then there’s no need for me to tell you.”

A sweet smile crept up Ranpo’s lips as his green eyes cleared, catching Dazai’s stare. “I don’t know how it happened. Delight me. I hate not knowing things.”

Normally this game of prying for information would have been fun, each of them digging for any hints the other let slip. Right now, however, Dazai felt the pressing urge to punch Ranpo into the nose.

“Deal with it. I don’t have to tell you anything.”

It was still his private life they were talking about. In all honesty, Dazai himself hadn’t wrapped his head around what had happened the last few hours. Everything was a mess. Everything had gone down in such a short span of time. Multiple lives were endangered. Figuring out his emotions didn’t exactly make it to the top of his priority-list.

And then Ranpo had to rub it in that if he hadn’t left Chuuya would still be fine. After all, it was Dazai’s fault. If he hadn’t left, he could have stopped Chuuya, or at least have joined him, and Chuuya wouldn’t have been on his own against Erebus.

The guilt plagued Dazai ever since Akutagawa had told him where he had gone. It had been sheer luck that he had decided to go after him, the uneasy feeling in his gut telling him something had been off. Had he decided to ignore it, Chuuya would have died. Damn it, it still had been a close call, he couldn’t even be sure now that Chuuya would survive.

He had faith in Yosano, knowing she worked effectively, but after Chuuya had lain in his lap, unmoving, bleeding and barely breathing, a voice in his mind kept repeating that his partner might have already been beyond help.

Dazai should have warned him. Should have told him how dangerous Erebus really was, how much of a threat he posed.

Maybe Chuuya wouldn’t have gone off then. Why had he done it in first place? How had he known where to find him?

The more Dazai thought about it, the less everything added up. When they had been mulling over the books together, they hadn’t had collected any useful information yet, let alone the location of Erebus’ summoning.

He had always been aware that Chuuya had a sharp mind but he must have underestimated him, nevertheless. That only added to the many reasons Dazai could easily find why he simply couldn’t lose Chuuya. Dazai had no idea how he would deal with this mess if he ended up alone.

Chuuya was his anchor, pushing him forward and making him believe he could take on the battle. Dazai had realized this the night Chuuya had walked in on him.

He had carried the secret with him such a long time now, having never shared it before and while
the words hadn’t left his tongue easily, telling Chuuya at least some parts of the story took weight off his shoulders he didn’t even know he was carrying around.

He trusted Chuuya. He had realized that now.

He trusted him on an entirely different level than he trusted his friends – it ran much deeper.

He would put his life into Chuuya’s hands as much as he would make sure to keep him safe. At least that’s what he wanted to believe. It didn’t slip his mind that he had failed to do so.

It all reduced to one question: How would have things gone if Dazai had had the courage to stay?

The sound of a door opening made Dazai snap back to reality. All eyes were on Yosano as she stepped out of the pathology, pulling off her latex gloves with a smacking sound. An exhausted sigh left her lips but then a hint of a smile tugged at their corners.

“He’s going to be fine. He’s unconscious now, but he should wake up soon.”

Tears welled up.

Chuuya had made it. He was going to live.

Dazai’s chest swelled heavily, taking a moment to fully realize the significance Yosano’s words sustained. Chuuya had made it. Relief settled, and yet, the tension did not seep from his shoulders. Never had Dazai received better news than in that moment, chest exploding with warmth for Chuuya would live.

“He has lost an insane amount of blood,” Yosano continued, “I believe if it hadn’t been for his ability, he wouldn’t be alive anymore.”

“But it’s his ability that’s accountable for this mess,” the words left Dazai’s mouth before he could think about them, which was unlike him, but his mind had shut off a while ago as it seemed.

“What do you mean by ‘his ability is accountable?’” Not understanding what he was talking about, Yosano squinted at him.

Right, they hadn’t witnessed what he and Akutagawa had seen. For all they knew Chuuya got injured during the fight with Erebus.

“His ability did this to him. I don’t know how to describe it,” he paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, “it almost appeared as if it ripped him apart from inside. He didn’t take a single hit from Erebus but rather landed them. That was the first time I’ve seen something like this.”

Silence settled along with a prickling tension but Dazai could hear them thinking. Everyone tried to find a logical explanation for what had happened, but there was none. Such happenings were unheard of.

“That makes sense, it aligns with his injuries,” Yosano said, eyes unfocused as she continued to mull over some thoughts. “Did you know he called us?”

Dazai shook his head.

“Yeah, me too,” Atsushi said, “right before you arrived.”

“What did he need?” The information piqued Dazai’s interest. What would his partner need to know so desperately that he couldn’t even ask him? Thinking about it further though, he
remembered all the missed calls that had come in while his phone had been turned off. Chuuya had intended to ask him but Dazai hadn’t allowed him to, having been so desperate for space that he had opted to ignore him.

It made Dazai feel worse. Well aware that he had messed up in the past enough, he now realized even everything together didn’t come close to how big he had fucked up today. His decisions had almost cost Chuuya’s life. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he tried to comfort himself.

Ranpo enlightened him. “He asked if you have ever associated with a temple. I told him you have in the past but I don’t have to tell you that that’s all I know.”

Yosano nodded in agreement. “And then he continued to ask about Fyodor. I gave him his phone number.”

Dazai’s entire body tensed up. She had what? However, it all made sense - or at least a little more than before. Fyodor may be useful at times, but there was a reason Dazai had stopped providing him any personal information years ago. Hell, he even regretted telling him anything ever.

“Dazai, are you alright? You’re a bit pale.”

Atsushi’s voice, shrill in his ears, didn’t suffice to shake the anxiety about what Fyodor might have done from his bones.

But dealing with that could wait. At least for some more time.

“Can I see him?” Dazai asked Yosano. He had lingered out here for long enough now. He needed to see Chuuya.

When she nodded, he turned his back to all of them and didn’t hesitate to walk into the pathology, past the row of empty metal tables, to the back where a small infirmary was stationed. It reeked of sanitizer but the biting scent failed to eradicate the faint smell putrefaction that lingered. The mix had tears well up in Dazai’s eyes.

There he lay, still asleep. Yosano had stripped Chuuya of all his clothes, apparent by the dirty, bloody bundle on the chair next to him and Dazai pulled another one aside to take a seat. He wouldn’t leave until Chuuya woke up. Not again.

A strand of Chuuya’s red hair clung to his forehead and neck, still covered in blood and filth but his body, at least what Dazai could see of it, had been washed clean by Yosano. Not a single bruise tainted Chuuya’s body – proof of how diligently the doctor worked.

Dazai reached for Chuuya’s hand before he could think about it. His thumb stroked over the backside soothingly, though it was meant more for himself than for Chuuya, whose chest rose and sunk in a steady rhythm. It was a good sign.

Such a situation couldn’t happen again. This was Dazai’s battle, not Chuuya’s. He had no share in it and it wasn’t fair of Dazai to drag him along and into danger. Why hadn’t he considered that sooner?

A sigh escaped Chuuya’s lips, getting Dazai’s attention right away. Shortly after, his eye’s fluttered open Dazai immediately retracted his hand. He didn’t know if Chuuya would appreciate the touch.

As soon as he had opened his eyes, Chuuya shut them again, groaning at the bright light. Then he pulled himself into a sitting position on his elbows. He grimaced doing so, his body probably sore
despite the treatment, but nothing could be done about that. Having been treated by Yosano once, Dazai could emphasize with the pain it came with.

Only when Dazai was sure he had gotten ahold of his consciousness he dared to speak. He kept his tone low to not cause Chuuya more of a headache than he probably had.

“How are you feeling?” Dazai knew it couldn’t be too well, but he needed a neutral question to test the waters.

“Like I’ve been overrun by a bus. Or rather five. Apart from that I guess I am fine.” Blue eyes squinting a little as they probably still reacted sensitively to the light. “You were there.”

Dazai nodded. “Do you remember what happened exactly?” He knew it was unfair to confront him with the recent events already, but it had to be done, rather sooner than later.

Chuuya sighed audibly, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. “I recall Fyodor, a frighteningly huge demon and a lot of fighting. At some point it gets a little blurry. I know I saw your blue. How did you know where to look for me?” The corners of his lips twitched at the memories.

Dazai managed to suppress the overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around Chuuya. Seeing that he really was undamaged and safe had his chest overflowing with emotions, all fluttery and over the place. As a compromise he scattered a little closer.

“I was with Akutagawa when he received your text. It was sheer luck that I knew the place and an intuition that you would need me.” He didn’t need to know more than that.

Chuuya had broken eye-contact and stared at the blanket that covered most of his body. His gaze seemed to have lost any focus and Dazai believed he didn’t even notice how his fingers curled into the sheets.

“I am sorry,” Chuuya said, surprising Dazai. What should he be sorry for?

Chuuya elaborated, “I have let myself being lured into a trap. I should have realized that it was just going too well, nothing should be this easy. I also shouldn’t have made a move without you. I do trust you to do the right. No idea how I thought I knew enough to take this up alone. Tough, I really didn’t expect to be awaited by Erebus. Hadn’t I busted –“

“Stop,” Dazai cut him off, possibly a little too sharply. Chuuya was in no place to give himself shit for trying to do the right thing. “You did what you believed to be right. That alone makes it honorable. If somebody should apologize it should be me. Hadn’t I run off like a coward, we could have found a proper solution.”

“Yeah, I guess, it was a bit of an unfortunate situation…” Chuuya mumbled and they both knew what exactly he referred to. However, this was neither the time nor the place to discuss the elephant in the room.

“Shush, I am not finished,” Dazai extended a hand and before he knew, Chuuya placed his own in his palm, locking their fingers together. Dazai’s heart pounded hard enough to burst through his chest, at least he believed so. “I should have told you how dangerous Erebus – and Fyodor as well – are. You couldn’t have known and if I hadn’t kept you in the dark you would have known better. I just don’t want you to be sucked into that any further. This is my mess to deal with; you were never supposed to come in the middle of it.”

One of Chuuya’s eyebrows rose and his freehand brushed a sticky strand away from his forehead, scrunching his nose at the feeling of it. “What are you trying to tell me?”
As he closed his eyes, Dazai took a deep breath. It would be the best for all of them.

“You can’t be working on this with me. This has nothing to do with you, you shouldn’t put your life on the brink just because I have run away from the past my entire life. I will handle this. I’ll find a way, but you have to keep out of it or worse things might happen to you.” In no way this was easy to say, but Dazai’s decision had been made.

“How selfish can a person be?”

With a jerk, Chuuya pulled his hand away. Dazai’s eyes snapped open. Chuuya’s teeth gritted in anger and Dazai recognized the flash of fury and hurt in his eyes. As much as it pained him, pained him to cause obvious misery to Chuuya again, he had to do this. It was for their best; surely Chuuya would understand soon.

But Dazai had expected him to put up a fight, which did indeed happen.

“How much of a jerk are you to have me pulled into this from the very beginning and only when I have been lying on that examination table over there, facing death, you have the decency to tell me to keep out of it? Guess what? I am not going to, because I am already knee deep into this mess. Damn it, you have willingly let me help you, agreed to let me help you. And now you want to tell me you never wanted it? I call bullshit.”

The words could have cut through skin. Dazai couldn’t even deny anything because Chuuya was right. But that had been before he had realized the seriousness of the situation. He hadn’t known Erebus had come back with the strength he had, accompanied by helpers.

“Can’t I admit to have made a mistake?” Dazai’s fists clenched in his lap.

Chuuya exploded, his face taking up the color of his hair. “So you think this was a mistake? That everything was a mistake? Me joining you? Helping you with the cases? Helping you to defeat Asmodeus? Without me you wouldn’t even have come close to fighting that demon! Want to tell me that everything about yesterday was a mistake in your eyes?”

Chuuya’s breath was labored, not having taken a breath as his words have grown louder until he was shouting at Dazai. The man didn’t dare to speak. One wrong word and he would push Chuuya away once and for all.

What if that’s what he had to do in order to keep him safe? Yes, it would hurt Dazai, but it would hurt him even more to see Chuuya injured again.

He didn’t get the chance to reply as the door to the hall opened. Both of their heads shot to Atsushi who entered with tentative steps and approached them. His right hand gripped around his phone, obviously uncomfortable coming in.

The timing was the worst and simultaneously the best. Bless his soul.

“I am sorry to interrupt whatever you were talking about, but I received some calls just a few minutes ago.”

“And?” Dazai tilted his head, not daring to look at Chuuya again just yet.

“One was from Kunikida. Akutagawa told him a little bit about what happened. The bodies are mutilated beyond recognition, but one arm they found had a tattoo on the wrist, making it possible to identify the person as one of the people that have gone missing the past months. That leads us to believe that most of the vanished people are part of that… sea.”
Tapping a finger on his knee, Dazai took in the information. “Erebus had to feast during the time on earth. It’s only plausible that he consumed so many souls if he grew to be as powerful as he is now.”

Yes, Chuuya might have routed the demon, but surely not defeated him. While he had caught him by surprise and injured him, nothing his partner did would ever ban the demon from earth and send him back to hell, even less destroy him.

Dazai heard fabric shuffling and Dazai quickly glanced at Chuuya, who tried to sit up straighter but quickly dropped into the matrass again, seemingly realizing how naked he was.

“Who else called you?” the redhead asked as he pulled the sheets higher up.

“Akutagawa.”

He had Dazai’s attention, “How is he? What did he do?”

Atsushi’s eyes flicked back and forth between Chuuya and him. Then, the corners of his lips pulled up into a small smile.

“Chuuya managed to pin Fyodor to a wall and then knocked him out. He was still there when Erebus vanished. Ryou and Rashoumon captured him and trapped him in the dungeon.”

Mouth agape, Dazai stared at Atsushi.

For years he hadn’t been able to do as much as touch Fyodor, his ability having no effect on him at all, and there Akutagawa brought him to the dungeon? Despite the great news, it was strange all the same. However, Dazai had never had a demonic beast by his side.

But as far as he knew, Akutagawa had no knowledge of the place. “How did he know about that one?” Dazai asked.

Blood rising into his cheeks and neck, Atsushi gained some more color as he rubbed his neck. “He called me, as he thought I could talk to you, but Ranpo answered his question of where to bring him.”

“The dungeon?” Right, Chuuya had no idea as well.

“Remember the backroom in Lucy’s shop?” Looking Chuuya into the eyes was harder than it should have been.

Chuuya nodded. Somehow, he had no issue acting composed in front of Atsushi.

“There was another room next to it. That’s what I call the dungeon. It’s a place that’s specially made to lock in ghosts. No matter how strong their e.m.e. is, they are stuck. Even Fyodor won’t be able to vanish.”

It seemed as if Chuuya intended to say anything but then decided against it as he shut his mouth again.

“Akutagawa said Fyodor has already come to senses again. You can interrogate him whenever you want,” Atsushi said.

“Then let’s go. We have no time to lose.” Looking at them expectantly, Chuuya appeared more than ready to make a head-start, his feet already slipping down the edge of the bed.
“I don’t think you should –“ Atsushi didn’t seem convinced that it was a good idea, neither was Dazai. Dazai was frantic. “Chuuya, you can’t go now, you are not in the state! Get some rest, let us handle it.”

Staring at him with narrowed eyes, Chuuya leaned forward until he hovered over Dazai’s face, being taller as Dazai still sat in the chair. At least Yosano had been decent enough to let him keep his boxers.

“Don’t you even dare! I can make my own decisions, and I am going to join you. I want to give that shithead a piece of my mind. So, if you don’t mind, would you find me anything to wear? I am sure there must be something around so I can leave this place.”

Just a day ago, Dazai’s would have let his gaze wonder over the beauty Chuuya’s body was but right now he did his best to keep his eyes to the floor.

Even if Dazai wanted to chain him to the bed, making sure nothing happened to him again, he couldn’t do so. Chuuya was headstrong, he knew what he wanted. If he had a plan, he would follow through with it. That didn’t mean Dazai had to approve.

He hadn’t even noticed that Atsushi had left and come back with a stack of clothes.

“These are my spare clothes I keep for emergency. They should fit you well enough, take them.”

Getting dressed took him less than a minute and Dazai had already made his way to the door, waiting for him.

It was a shame Dazai was in no place to openly appreciate the look of the slightly too large woolen sweater on Chuuya.

Outside, Yosano and Ranpo had made themselves comfortable on the chairs, legs stretched out over all of them. They perked up when they joined them in the hall.

“Chuuya, are you really good to go?” even Yosano sounded concerned.

He waved her off. “Yeah, sure, just a little sore. Thanks, for saving my life.”

Offering a smile, Yosano returned it. “No big deal. I’ll do it every time, but I hope there won’t be a next time.”

“Me too.”

While Chuuya insisted he was fine, Dazai knew he was not. Anyone who didn’t notice must have been blind. He could see the stiffness in his muscles and how he limped with every step. When they finished business with Fyodor, Dazai would make sure that he got proper rest.

Atsushi kindly offered them a ride as neither of them had a car to use right now.

It was a silent drive. Dazai felt sorry for Atsushi, who sensed the tension that hadn’t been resolved between them and shifted in his seat nervously more than he sat. The ride couldn’t be over quick enough.

It was well into the morning hours when they arrived at the coffee shop and the streets were empty, only illuminated by the yellow street light.

Lucy already awaited them at the entrance but didn’t say a word when they walked into the shop.
Akutagawa sat at one of the tables with Rashoumon between his legs. He looked up from his phone when he noticed them and Dazai was convinced that even his under-eye bags had bags. He looked like a walking corpse. That guy needed some rest desperately - they all needed a break.

“Glad to see you all alive,” Akutagawa said as they all gathered around the small table. Atsushi wrapped his arms around Akutagawa’s shoulders from behind, hugging him and planting a soft kiss on his cheek. One of Akutagawa’s hands began stroking his arm.

“Didn’t expect you here, Chuuya. Actually, I didn’t even think you could walk. You looked positively trashed.”

Rolling his eyes, Chuuya leaned back in the chair. “I am fine, really. Where is that failure of a ghost? I want to talk to him.”

Dazai caught Akutagawa’s skeptical glance and offered an affirmative nod. There was no use in holding Chuuya back now.

Akutagawa hesitantly answered his question, “Back in there. I have to give it to you, you really have a great aim. If he was still alive his skull would be sure smashed. Getting the daggers out of the wall wasn’t exactly easy either.”

A confident, yet tired, smirk appeared on Chuuya’s lips. “You know I don’t do things halfheartedly.”

And it was something Dazai respected Chuuya for. He always gave his best.

“Did Fyodor say anything to you?” Dazai asked. They needed to get back on track so that they could finish this as soon as possible.

Shaking his head Akutagawa replied, “He refused to talk to anyone but you. I tried to get some information out of him, but he didn’t say a word other than ‘I want to speak to Dazai’.”

Well, if that didn’t sound familiar. What a typical move of him.

If it had been for Dazai they would have let him rot in the dungeon for several days before even getting close to him.

On one hand, the day had tired Dazai out, emotionally and physically. He knew he wouldn’t remember everything he needed to ask and wanted to say. On the other hand, anger fueled him, leaving it out of question what the first action he would to when entering the room would be.

Preparing himself for facing Fyodor, he pushed some lose strands of hair out of his face. Chuuya jumped to his feet before he could react, heading straight for the door. Dazai could only rush after Chuuya; however, not fast enough to stop him. It was unlocked from the outside, so getting in posed no issue.

Even if he didn’t want to feel it, watching Chuuya kicking Fyodor into that smug face of his brought him more satisfaction than he cared to admit. The slapping sound echoed through the white room and with the next kick, Fyodor’s neck made an ugly cracking sound. Dazai wished the guy still lived, just to see him die again.

Taking some steps back, Chuuya opened the field and gestured a hand in Fyodor’s direction as he addressed Dazai. “Now’s the time. I know you want it.”

He couldn’t stop the grin appearing on his face. With pleasure.
Dazai’s fist met Fyodor’s face thrice and Dazai swore he heard Chuuya chuckling behind him.

Fyodor coughed. “You know you can’t actually harm me like this?” The arrogant tone bothered Dazai. For once, that appeared a valid reason to place another punch at his nose.

“That doesn’t make it any less fun,” Dazai replied.

Somebody had restricted Fyodor’s arms with cuffs, undoubtedly found in his repertoire of ghost-hunting stuff.

He crouched down in front of him, putting the two of them at eye level. “I’ve been told you want to talk to me.”

Fyodor’s gaze flickered to Chuuya standing behind Dazai.

“Don’t even think about it,” Chuuya laughed, “It’s either both of us or nobody.”

If Dazai had gotten a say in it he would have liked him out of the room, not caring how unfair it would be. He wasn’t yet ready to accept that Chuuya wouldn’t let him push him away anymore, but at the same time, knowing that Chuuya wanted to be at his side, for whatever reason that might be, warmed his chest.

Returning his attention to Dazai again, he was met by cold indifference. Then, the bastard really had the audacity to smirk.

“You sure have found a loyal pet.”

“He’s not my pet. He’s my partner and sure you are very confident to speak of him like that, after he put you out in seconds.” Despite the discussion they had yet to finish, it felt good to rub the fact that he had someone that strong by his side into Fyodor’s face. And even if Dazai would still try to talk him out of helping him with Erebus, he would still want him as his partner.

Chuuya uttered a dry laugh, “You call me a pet while you yourself are nothing else but a pawn of Erebus. Who do you think you are?”

“Erebus needs me,” Fyodor said and at first Dazai believed he had misheard.

“Why would he need a fly like you for anything?” Erebus didn’t need help. He had proven that years ago. He merely wanted people to do the dirty work for him, who were ready to sacrifice themselves for nothing, like Asmodeus had done.

Emotionless didn’t do Fyodor’s expression justice, despite the glued-on smile. Looking into his eyes resembled looking into the void.

“Because he wants you. And I am his easiest way to get to you.”

“What do you mean?” Dazai asked.

“Who do you think summoned him? Who do you think told him what you did for a living? Whose idea do you think was it to have the car crash, so we could get your attention? Who do you think told Asmodeus how do act discreetly around you? And you pride yourself for your intelligence? It was so easy to convince him, he almost burst given the chance to get to you and receiving his reward. What a shame he never got that far. If it hadn’t been for your watchdog we would have finished much earlier. There are no coincidences in life, Dazai. Keep that in mind. And once he has you, I will be prince, his right hand in his kingdom. It’s what I am destined for.”
Fyodor's laugh sent a shiver down his spine.

"You might have contained me, Dazai, but do you really believe Erebus has only me? Just you wait. Wait for his army to rise. He won't let you go this time, you've been always belonged to him, I've known that from the very start."

Words hitting him differently, Dazai froze. He'd known Fyodor for years now. How long had Foyodr worked with Erebus, told him about every step he had made, about -

The red orb hit Fyodor right into the temple, knocking him out effectively, pulling him out of his trance.

Dazai’s head snapped in Chuuya’s direction, whose hands were hidden in the pockets of the jeans, acting all casual.

“He’s lost his mind. He’s a damn maniac. I don’t need to hear that crap.” For all the fuss he had made before, Chuuya appeared mostly unbothered now and obviously determined to get on Dazai’s nerves.

“I had some more questions,” Dazai hissed, “Don’t you want to know where Erebus might be now?”

“How should he know, he’s had no way of contacting him. He also wouldn’t tell you, even if he knew,” Chuuya shrugged.

Dazai stood up again. “But if I am their target, why would they be after you, lure you in a trap?”

Something in Dazai’s mind failed to connect the dots apparently, and when Chuuya laughed at him his confusion only multiplied.

Dazai couldn’t interpret the look on Chuuya’s face. The combination of mockery, fondness and irritation had him back up a step, especially when Chuuya flashed him a humorless grin.

“They want me out of the way. They are well aware that I protect you and it interfered with their plans that I am apparently stronger than they anticipated. As long as I am by your side, they won’t be able to make a real move on you. That’s why Fyodor lured me into that damn temple.”

“How would you know?” Dazai’s voice got stuck in his throat. Was that true?

“Because they told me, dumbass,” Chuuya gradually leaned forward, invading Dazai’s personal space. “Sometimes you can be really dense.”

Dazai had no idea what to say. It wasn’t that he didn’t know that Chuuya protected him and had already saved him when needed. But he would have never guessed that the only reason Erebus hadn’t come for him yet was because he feared Chuuya. Dumbfounded, he blinked at Chuuya, whose grin only widened. His eyes, however, didn’t carry any amusement.

“Still so sure you want to get rid of me?”

Chuuya was now close enough for Dazai to feel his breath.

“I never said I want to get rid of you, I only –“

“Then don’t try to push me away. You are stuck with me, if you want it or not.” Chuuya’s whisper was low and vibrated through Dazai’s body, making him shiver. But Chuuya didn’t wait for a
reply. Instead, he turned his back on him and got out of the room.

Why couldn’t Dazai shake the feeling that there was so much more to Chuuya’s words than the discussion about their partnership? Or maybe Dazai only wanted it to be that way.

Everything he had thought about earlier got thrown over. He would need to reconsider his decisions and words. Desperately. How could he have been so wrong so many times in one day?

He still wanted Chuuya to be safe. He still resented knowing that with being close to him, Chuuya was in constant danger. But how had he missed the fact that it was too late now anyway. The demon was on their heels and would still be when they parted.

Only together they could be two steps ahead of him and for that they had to work as a team.

He had to apologize to Chuuya for so many things, as soon as possible. Hell, he had to apologize for practically everything he had said today.

In the main room, everybody else was still sitting around the table. Nobody hid how drained they felt and Dazai himself whished for nothing more than sleep. Maybe he could crash on Yosano’s couch. She surely wouldn't mind.

Lucy quickly got to her feet when she spotted him, the keys already dangling between her fingers.

“How can I lock up now? I really want to get home.”

“Sure. Just make sure to put an extra lock on the dungeon. We’ll let him rot for a few days. He deserves it.”

Unsurprisingly, everyone agreed with that decision.

Atsushi again gave them a ride, asking firstly where Chuuya lived. When Dazai said he should drop him off at Yosano’s, Chuuya looked ready to slap him as well.

“No, you’re not.”

“What?”

“Weren’t you staying with me?”

Now Dazai was sure he didn’t imagine the waver of hurt in his voice.

“I just assumed you wouldn’t want me to stay with you anymore.”

He struggled to understand the situation, having been convinced Chuuya would want as much distance from him as possible tonight. Wasn’t Chuuya mad at him? He should be, judging by the conversation - or fight if you want to call it that - they had earlier. Although, the atmosphere in the dungeon had been a completely different one just minutes ago.

Dazai couldn’t see clearly in the darkness of the car, but by his tone he assumed Chuuya to be fairly annoyed, “Why wouldn’t I? Also, you are the only one who has the keys right now, as long as you haven’t lost them. Mine are still at the police station inside my dirty clothes. I even need you to get into my apartment. So you are coming with me.”

Dazai didn’t dare to argue. He had an inclination that if he did Chuuya would get more than furious with him. His tone gave him away. Dazai merely noticed Atsushi’s curious glances through the back mirror who immediately averted his eyes as soon as he realized he had been spotted.
Thanks for reading and your support<3
I must be honest, I haven't finished chapter 16 yet, but I am currently juggling it along with my studies, pray for me that I'll finish it in time... I'd just hate to leave you waiting. But nothing's set yet, I am trying my best!
Visit me on Instagram, you can always chat with me if you want to: here
Hello again!
First of all, thank you so much for all the positive response to this fic since the last chapter! It really overwhelmed me!
Have fun with this chapter, I hope it does the story justice...
Enjoy!

TW: implication/mentioning of self harm, past abuse

When Chuuya padded into the kitchen, he saw Dazai already hunched over the books and notes he had left scattered on the table yesterday. Or maybe he was still studying them because Dazai didn’t look as if he had slept a second since they had gotten back.

Chuuya had fallen right into his bed, without a word to Dazai. He had been desperate for rest, the day getting to him, and despite the irrational want to have Dazai at his place he also had ached for distance to the idiot. Anger had still flown through his veins and although he knew they needed to talk, he hadn’t been in the proper state of mind and body for that.

Now, watching as Dazai rested his head on one propped up hand, eyes unfocused and head lowering dangerously close to the tabletop as he nodded off for a second, he was still angry at him but not nearly as furious anymore. Rather, he was disappointed.

Yes, he could see where Dazai was coming from and why he wanted to keep him out of the feud he had with the demon. But why couldn’t Dazai see that the point of no return had already been crossed? It wasn’t as if he hadn’t made the choice to visit the temple by himself. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t volunteered to help with the demonic inscriptions.

He might not have been aware of the extent of the situation, but Dazai should know that Chuuya had enough brain to have evaluate the dangerousness of what he had decided to get into at the time. Chuuya had made the decision deliberately, why couldn’t Dazai get that into that smart head of his?

Still unsure if he wanted to talk to Dazai just yet, Chuuya decided to grab a coffee first. And at the same time, he could make one for his partner as well. He looked as if he could use some.

When he placed the mug a little too forcefully in front of Dazai, his head snapped up. Chuuya’s unbothered expression was met by bloodshot eyes and for a brief moment pity welled up in Chuuya’s chest. Dazai truly hadn’t slept enough tonight and it was midday by now.

At the same time, Chuuya couldn’t brush off the frustration that rested within him. No words would suffice to describe how much Dazai had disappointed him with his words - in multiple ways.

“Drink, you look like trash,” Chuuya pushed the mug closer to Dazai, whose hands closed around it, probably yearning for the warmth.
“You don’t look any better yourself,” the lopsided smile Chuuya received was familiar but lacked the usual cockiness. Okay, Chuuya did feel bad for Dazai. They needed a break, desperately - both of them. While Chuuya felt mediocre rested, he knew how terrible he looked, having casted a glance into the mirror earlier, and the soreness hit in to its fullest today. Moving without at least twenty muscles screaming in pain appeared impossible. He probably should get used to the aching; it had become a stable companion over the past few days and he doubted it would cease any time soon.

“Don’t you say,” Chuuya mumbled, taking a seat across Dazai. They sat in silence for a while, not looking at each other, neither of them awake enough to speak. And maybe it was a matter of putting off the necessary talk. The only sound occasionally heard was them sipping the hot liquid. But the more time passed, the more awkward the atmosphere grew. At some point they had to address the issue – or issues better to say.

Chuuya would have been fine with brushing matters aside and continuing the same way they had before; however, he knew it wouldn’t be an option. They hadn’t resolved whatever had happened at the pathology and the awkwardness would just follow them around. The way they desperately avoided looking each other into the eye, simply pathetic; even Chuuya could see that.

Summoning the courage to speak up took him several minutes. Just when he opened his mouth to utter his thoughts, Dazai preempted him: “I never wanted you to think I wanted to get rid of you, you know?” Brown, tired eyes looked up from underneath those long lashed to meet Chuuya’s. Maybe he meant what he said. Could Chuuya be sure of that?

“Didn’t sound like that yesterday. You were quite determined to push me away.” Resting his chin on one propped up hand, Chuuya held the eye-contact which cost him a lot of effort as regret flashed over Dazai’s features.

“I want you to be safe.”

“You’ve said so, but don’t you think it’s a little late for that?” The grip Chuuya had around the mug tightened and hadn’t he been so tired, he would have surely broken the handle off, judging by the force he applied.

Dazai was being irrational. For the first time since they got to know each other, Dazai’s decisions didn’t make any sense. Didn’t he see that the demon was already after him? It wouldn’t stop its hunt now just because he decided to withdraw from the fight.

Dazai seemed to mull over his response, his mind probably having troubles with keeping up in its exhausted state.

“Not if I take the right actions.”

Chuuya almost choked on his coffee.

“Don’t you dare.” It shouldn’t just sound like it, Chuuya meant to threaten him. He had no intention of going down that road again. “I have told you; you are stuck with me. I am way too deep into that shit that I could just let you handle this on your own, or even let you seek out that demon alone.” Chuuya felt redness rising into his cheeks and Dazai watched his outburst silently. “By now I have a personal feud with Erebus that I very much intend to resolve it myself.”

Chuuya was fuming and more than ready to slap Dazai across the face. He had already had the urge yesterday, when he had still been lying in that damn hospital-like bed, stripped of his clothes
and hurting, and he had believed that the desire had died over night but right now, it flared up anew. What the hell was wrong with Dazai? He had believed they had disputed that topic.

Finally, after staying quiet for at least a minute, Dazai sighed and his head dropped onto the table. “I am sorry for having dragged you into this”, the mop of brown hair muttered.

Taken aback by the honesty in his tone, Chuuya suddenly felt sorry for having yelled at him. The anger didn’t vanish, but it paired with bad conscience. Dazai must have been even more exhausted than him. Chuuya surely didn’t make things easier for his partner. One of his hands reached out for Dazai’s shoulder to stroke it before he changed his mind. Why were they both such a mess?

“I know,” Chuuya whispered, “but we can make this together. Don’t even think of an alternative idea. I know the risks I am taking here and I am more than ready to take them up for you.”

Raising his head to look at Chuuya, Dazai didn’t seem as if he fully understood what Chuuya implied. Chuuya exhaled loudly. Why would he? Chuuya knew Dazai cared but Dazai had yet to find out about his attraction to the walking waste of bandages. Maybe it would be better to leave that matter for another time, much later. They needed to focus and Chuuya knew he wouldn’t be able to handle a rejection while working on defeating Erebus.

“Are you mad at me?”

Chuuya winced at how broken Dazai’s voice was, shoulders slumping. Lying wouldn’t make it any better.

“A little. You’ve been quite an ass yesterday, but how I could I be mad at you when knowing you have saved my life?”

Chuuya’s pupils blew wide when Dazai sat up straight and pulled his sweater over the head, leaving him in the shirt below, which he began to unbutton from the top. What had gotten into him?

Heat crept up his neck and Chuuya jerked back. “What are you doing?” It needed every ounce of self-control to not let his voice waver. Maybe it did anyway. Chuuya was too occupied with keeping his eyes away from the skin that got revealed in front of him.

“I think you should know why Erebus is after me.”

The words were what allowed Chuuya to look. In contrast to the last time, the inscriptions on Dazai’s ribs had begun to heal up, no longer open but still red and looking painful - now that Chuuya knew their meaning even more so.

Hesitantly, he ripped his gaze away from the ribcage and let it trail up Dazai’s chest, over his shoulders and down to his arms. He had wondered what had caused the scars, what Dazai had to bear when he had been young but it hadn’t occurred to him to ask.

Now Dazai insisted on him looking and he began noticing details he hadn’t when he had taken care of his wounds or maybe just couldn’t remember. Chuuya’s eyes got stuck on particularly deep and wide scars on his underarms. Noticing what he paid attention to, Dazai turned them so Chuuya could see more clearly.

“You told me your story once. I think now is my turn to tell you mine.”

The trust in Dazai’s expression overwhelmed Chuuya. It had his stomach flutter. And while he was honored to be one of probably a few chosen ones, Chuuya couldn’t shake the fear of what would
come next. He wasn’t sure to be ready.

Dazai’s right hand grazed over a large scar on his chest that stretched up to his shoulder and well over his stomach. His fingers trembled as he took a shaky breath. The air crackled with nervousness, though Chuuya couldn’t pinpoint whose.

“I’ve got most of the scars under the age of seven,” Dazai began, eyes closed as if he couldn’t bear Chuuya’s scrutinizing anymore. Chuuya quickly averted his gaze.

“Back then, my parents were still alive. They weren’t bad people by any means, they just had a … very specific view on life.” His hands subconsciously trailed off down to his arms, “They were part of a cult that used children as sacrifices.”

Chuuya’s throat dried. Disgusting. Suddenly, he could imagine how the scars had formed, a vivid picture in his mind. How fucked up had people to be to harm their own children, believing that calling the devil would be a solution. Not knowing any appropriate words he felt the urge to comfort him physically, but realizing how far away Dazai seemed mentally, how he couldn’t stop tracing the silvery skin, Chuuya decided against it. Later. He would have time for that later. So he let Dazai continue.

“Children are innocent, their hands are not dirtied by blood but their own, they don’t have bad intentions, you know, Chuuya? That’s why demons adore children.” Disturbed by Dazai’s humorless smile, Chuuya pulled his legs up to his chest, closing his arms around them. He felt uncomfortable in his own skin.

“The scars,” Dazai pointed to the ones on his lower arm, “were cut open by knives, over and over again for every single attempt of summoning a demon. Some of the scars on my back and chest are the result of punishment for having failed.”

If Chuuya had thought the words burnt into Dazai’s skin were horrible, he got proven wrong just now. Dazai had to carry the reminders of his past and abusers with him every single day. Chuuya remembered tracing the wide scars on the back and how Dazai had tensed at the touch. It made Chuuya sick to the core, realizing were it came from and what it must have reminded Dazai of. His own skin prickled where the cuts on Dazai were.

Something wet rolled down Chuuya’s cheek and he quickly wiped away the tear before Dazai noticed he was crying.

“I don’t think I need to tell you who exactly they were trying to summon. And you probably have figured that one day, they succeeded. A scrawny cult in the back country of Michigan, managed to summon one of the kings of hell. But it was destined to fail.”

A shudder hit Chuuya when Dazai laughed dryly. His voice was growing lower and calmer with every sentence and Chuuya didn’t know if to interpret it as a good thing or if the memories threatened to suck Dazai into a dark place.

“That wards weren’t strong enough, if they had any wards at all; I don’t even remember. But Erebus had gained control as soon as he emerged and within seconds the place was a battle field, cowered in blood and limbs and frightened souls that were devoured by Erebus as soon as they had been set free. Not that there was much of a fight, it was more of a mass slaughter. And I was there, in middle of corpses, covered and saved by my ability that I didn’t even know could do such things back then.”

As if on call, Dazai’s hands glowed in the familiar blue but Chuuya doubted that Dazai noticed.
The room grew cold. Chuuya had to fight the impulse to activate his own ability.

“Erebus couldn’t touch me and he was furious. He came for my blood, after all. I was the bait. He got lured into our realm by me. And yet he couldn’t have me. I think you can imagine that with seven I wasn’t particularly skilled with my ability. I still don’t have full control over it, after all these years,” Dazai opened his eyes and they fell on his glowing fingers, confirming his statement and he smiled bitterly, “In that moment it just did what it could best: protect me. Erebus managed to mark me. In hell, I am marked as his alone to touch.”

His gaze unfocused and then he stared into the void, as if he watched something playing out in Chuuya’s kitchen, or rather in front of his eyes.

Chuuya gulped once, afraid of talking to him. He feared where it would put Dazai. However, some questions still plagued him, and despite not wanting to push, he decided to ask. Dazai wanted him to know? Then he deserved to know it all.

“If your ability protected you, then why could he cast that spell on you?”

Eyes flicking back to Chuuya’s face with wide blown pupils. The tentative words seemed to have pulled him back into the present time. Dazai hands dropped from his scars onto the table, and a tang of relief tugged at Chuuya’s heart at the sight of him coming to his senses again.

Fingers tapped on the wooden plate while the other hand hugged around his chest, the goose-bumps on his skin evident.

“I probably won’t ever find out the truth, but I believe it’s because the priest has promised me to Erebus, making me his property and allowing him to put a seal on me. It’s like a warning sign for any other being that would have the guts trying to obtain me. I am already reserved for Erebus. In addition, my ability was occupied with keeping me alive. I assume it just couldn’t manage to take care of any other influences as well.”

“Is there a way to break the curse?”

“Kill him. It would mean to extract the e.m.e. from his very essence, his core, not only his body.”

Nodding in understanding, Chuuya let the information sink in. It all made sense. Demons were possessive, it’s what they were known for and in younger years, untrained and inexperienced, Dazai wouldn’t have been able to direct his ability. It had been like that for Chuuya as well, remembering how his ability had stopped the farmer’s screw drivers, had protected him.

The prior decency forgotten, Chuuya shamelessly let his gaze wander over Dazai again. Deep wounds had been cut and burnt into his body, leaving behind evident scars, although he realized something off. The scars on his upper arms were thinner; some of them had almost faded over the years. They just didn’t fit in with the others and yet he couldn’t bring the words out the way he wanted to.

“The scars on your upper arm; are they…,” The words heavy on his tongue, he barely could look at Dazai anymore. It was uncomfortable, Chuuya didn’t know why he asked in first place.

Understanding what the other tried to say, Dazai sucked on his lower lip as if unsure on how to reply. Maybe Chuuya had overstepped his boundaries now; the atmosphere in the room growing even more awkward then it had been before.

He apologized hurriedly, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have –“
“It’s fine.” And yet Dazai put on his sweater again, pulling the sleeves down far enough to cover his hands as he continued. “Yeah, they are. Some needs to find a way with the cruelty of this world, Chuuya, but I don’t have to tell you that, do I?” The smile didn’t reach his eyes. Instead it carried something sad, something that caused Chuuya to feel a piece of his heart breaking into pieces as Dazai stared right into his soul.

The world was dark, unfair and terrifying at times, even to Chuuya who hadn’t suffered nearly as much as Dazai. Yes, his parents had died too young, but Chuuya had always been taken care of. He had always had enough support to stay safe and sane, even when he had searched for an escape - support Dazai apparently didn’t have.

Chuuya neither deserved nor wanted Dazai’s pity. If anyone had to be pitied it would be Dazai but Chuuya doubted Dazai would want that either.

Something must have given away his thoughts as Dazai tilted his head to one side in the way Chuuya loved so much about him and let out a huff, his demeanor becoming more serious. “No, don’t apologize. I am alright currently, and I have been for a while. Even more so lately. It’s in the past and our current problem is an entirely different one.”

Chuuya paused for a moment before replying in a soft voice, “You don’t have to pretend it didn’t happen; it’s part of you, just as your entire past. But that doesn’t define you. You are so much more than that to me.”

Realizing what he had just said he stopped taking abruptly, as a blush rising into his cheeks. He wouldn’t let the words come out that told how strong he thought Dazai was, how proud he could be of himself and his achievements, how much Chuuya admired him for staying sane. His mind hadn’t yet shut off that badly to let that slip.

He didn’t know if he was allowed to. An invisible barrier stood between them since yesterday afternoon.

Yes, Dazai had touched him when he had lain in that nursery bed; yet he didn’t feel as if he had permission to touch Dazai. It was nothing like when they had fallen asleep on the couch, relying on each other as if the world depended on it.

That’s where the problem lay; it probably wasn’t the world that depended on it, but it was their world that did. They needed to work together to figure out where Erebus hid and how to extinguish him once and for all.

But could they do that if they kept each other at an arm’s length? Would they still be able to trust each other with their lives when the situation called for it? Trust was fundamental but how could that be granted if Chuuya didn’t even have the guts anymore to pull Dazai into the hug he deserved?

At loss for words, Dazai stared at Chuuya, lips slightly parted and speechless. Those lips that had kissed him less than a day ago.

The realization hit Chuuya with the force of a speeding car: Dazai had kissed back. He remembered enough to know for sure that Dazai hadn’t pulled back. He had kissed him equally as eager if not even more so, and Chuuya wanted to slap himself for not having realized that. It had been Dazai’s hands that had slipped under his shirt. It had been Dazai who had responded.

If Dazai hadn’t wanted it, wouldn’t he have pushed him away?
Chuuya shot up from his seat. How hadn’t he seen?

The spark of hope that lit up in his chest overwhelmed him. Maybe they could resolve the tension right now. He couldn’t be wrong, not now. Had they really been both that stupid and ignorant?

He rounded the table to stand in front of Dazai, summoning up the courage to take the next step as he looked into large, brown eyes, sizing him up expectantly. His heart pounded hard enough to escape his ribcage. Reaching for Dazai’s sweater, intending to pull him closer to him, to close the gap between them, Chuuya knew this the only thing to do. They both wanted it.

But Chuuya didn’t come any further.

The ring of the doorbell pulled him out of his mindset. He could have yelled in frustration. What now? Why now? The grip on the shirt loosened as his brows furrowed in irritation. Exhaling tensely, Chuuya squinted at Dazai, “Did you invite anybody over?”

He swore to whatever deity existing; if the shithead was responsible for ruining the moment he would -

Dazai shook his head, disheveled hair bouncing with the motion. “No, why should I? It’s your apartment after all.”

Letting go of him, Chuuya backed up, a hand running through his hair in despair. This was the worst timing one could have.

He didn’t check the spy-hole but instead pulled the door open with too much force and snapped at the unwelcomed visitor. “What?”

In fact, there were multiple people in front of his apartment, right in the front Yosano, who had one hand propped up on a hip while the other one held up a plastic bag. She didn’t exactly happen to be pleased by being yelled at as first thing, her nose twitching in disapproval. “Good afternoon to you too, Chuuya.”

Then Chuuya noticed the others behind her. Everyone from yesterday had come, except for Lucy whose place Gin had taken, a set of keys dangling from one of her fingers, the metallic sound drawing in his attention. He immediately recognized them.

“Are these mine?”

“Yes,” a sheepish smile tugged at the corners of Gin’s lips.

Chuuya continued to stare at them, still holding the door open and a little lost on what to do with so many impromptu guests. The silence kind of awkward, Akutagawa decided to push forward, walking right past him into the apartment.

“Thanks for letting us in.”

A little baffled, Chuuya stepped aside and watched them all entering, one after another. He couldn’t remember the last time he had so many people over, even less when so many guests had invited themselves. His mind had a hard time coping. He wasn’t in the right state of mind for such stunts, the conversation they had had still residing heavily in his bones.

“Chuuya, who’s at the door?”

Chuuya intended to reply, but Yosano preempted him, “It’s us. You’ve had time to rest, now it’s
time to give us answers.” She dropped the bag on the couch and Chuuya saw his clothes from the previous day peeking out.

How did it come that all women he knew had a dominant aura surrounding them? Had he been any less confident and unfamiliar with the demeanor, he would have been intimidated.

While Chuuya had been at the door, Dazai had slipped into clean, comfortable clothes that hid all of his scars and hadn’t it been for his tired expression, he would have appeared quite fine. Looking at Chuuya confusedly, the redhead merely shrugged.

Ranpo had already taken up the couch while Akutagawa had made a beeline into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. Yosano was inspecting his furnishing and Gin had found Chuuya’s world map with pins stuck into the placed he had visited. Only Atsushi didn’t seem as if he belonged there, his gaze flicking through the room nervously. They were all over the place.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Chuuya took a deep breath. He needed to gather his thoughts.

Just when he opened his mouth to speak up, he got interrupted, again.

“Hey, Chuuya, catch!”

He barely managed to catch the keys flying directly at his face and he fumbled a little as he tried to not drop them again. The glare he shot Gin would have scared any little child.

“We decided to retrieve your car, I let Gin drive. I hope that’s no issue for you.” Coming up from behind him, Akutagawa’s sudden appearance startled Chuuya and he flinched visibly.

He took another deep breath. He needed to relax. His still sore muscles didn’t cope well with the tension that was building up. Something brushed his shoulder, which turned out to be Dazai who had sneaked up next to him, standing close enough for their shoulders to touch. Chuuya smelt the laundry detergent. Yeah, they were both overwhelmed.

“Apparently she made it here safely, that’s all that matters,” Chuuya mumbled but it went unheard.

The loveseat next to the glass front made an ugly noise as it was dragged into the middle of the room, posing the perfect place for Akutagawa and Atsushi to take a seat. Too exhausted to complain, Chuuya accepted it silently. Gin had brought a stool from the kitchen while Yosano and Ranpo occupied parts of the couch.

And suddenly, all eyes were on them.

“Take a seat,” Ranpo said, leaning back with his arms crossed behind his head, “You owe us at least a mediocre explanation of what happened last night.”

Atsushi nodded in agreement, “And we need to know what you are considering to do next.”

Chuuya needed a few seconds to make sense of what they demanded. Then he crossed his arms in front of his chest, not noticing how he made a step forward to stand in front of Dazai defensively. “And that couldn’t have waited? You just drop by here, unannounced, expecting that we would -“

A hand gripped his shoulder, squeezing lightly. “We do owe them an explanation. After all, they saved our sorry asses, especially yours.”

Shutting up immediately, Chuuya realized that Dazai was right. Of course he was, Chuuya knew that. But it didn’t change anything about the annoyance that bubbled inside him, still bitter about having been interrupted and not ready for that sort of talk yet.
Dazai gently nudged him into the direction of the couch and when they both had sat down, Chuuya made sure to apologize for his little outburst. Nobody had taken offence, and he thanked them again for their help yesterday.

Yosano accepted the apology on behalf of everyone, “We would never leave you in the lurch. That’s what friends for. But we still don’t know what’s going on.”

“You gave us bits and pieces of information, but we have no idea what we are dealing with here”, Akutagawa explained, to which Ranpo nodded in agreement.

“I mean, it doesn’t take a mastermind to understand what you’ve been up to, but we’d like to hear what exactly happened from the both of you. We won’t be able to help you if we don’t know your next steps.”

“Help us?” The statement confused Chuuya. They had already helped them more than they should have. He also couldn’t recall having asked for assistance in anything.

“Of course,” Gin scoffed, “You obviously can’t do whatever you want to do alone. You need us and we are offering our help.”

“No, we are forcing our help on you,” Yosano corrected, “We will do anything to avoid a repetition of yesterday.”

Now it was Dazai’s turn to scoff. “If you help us, all of you are in danger. You all could die. Maybe next time you’ll be in Chuuya’s place. You shouldn’t even be part of this.” And Chuuya couldn’t agree more. Didn’t it suffice that they both had to deal with Erebus?

“Seconded.”

Ranpo and Yosano chuckled, while Akutagawa only rolled his eyes. “I hate to break it to you, but we are already part of this. You’ve both asked for our help multiple times by now. God damn it, I even helped staging a car crash. You really think this isn’t our deal anymore? Yosano picked you up when you were almost dead. Please, use your brain for once.”

Chuuya blinked at Akutagawa. He let his gaze wander to the others, who solemnly agreed with him. And then Chuuya laughed. Not loudly, not hysterically but honestly. Because this mirrored the discussion he had had with Dazai just earlier. If anybody should understand what they were asking for, then Chuuya himself. The laugh cut through the sudden silence that had settled amongst them.

Concerned faces mustered him, unsure of how to react, obviously confused. Next to him, Dazai tensed up even more.

“Yeah, you might be right. I guess you are,” Chuuya breathed as soon as he had calmed down, still chuckling, “May I?”

Meeting Dazai’s eyes caused an uptick in Chuuya’s heart rate. How much he wished they were alone and getting the chance to finally talk everything out.

They looked at each other a little too long, neither noticed the glances Yosano and Ranpo exchanged, a knowing expression settling on their features along with a subtle smile.

Dazai nodded, giving Chuuya permission, and so Chuuya began telling.

He explained what exactly had happened after the dinner, what he had found in Dazai’s flat, not
caring that Atsushi was already familiar with his findings, and he explained how he had come to the conclusion that Erebus must hide in a temple. Meanwhile, he picked his words carefully to avoid giving out too much personal information. He intentionally skipped Asmodeus’ curse and why Erebus explicitly demanded for Dazai. It wasn’t his story to tell.

Dazai didn’t interrupt him, letting him tell until he had reached the point of their arrival and all his breath had run out. He had been talking too much too fast.

Not in the condition for sitting straight for so long, Chuuya’s back had begun hurting and when he finally had told all the necessary details about the demons, he leant back. Instead of cushions he met Dazai’s side. At first, he tensed at the touch, but right now, worrying about mere touches felt silly when compared to the real issue, so he let himself sink against Dazai, shuffling a little until he sat comfortably.

“Fyodor told me Erebus intended to terminate Chuuya before making a move on Dazai.” Atsushi just put the statement into the room, not addressing anyone in particular.

Ranpo picked it up. “That means, Dazai is most likely safe as long as Chuuya is alive. We can use that to our benefit.”

“But that was before Chuuya turned out to be a self-terminating destruction machine. What if his plans have changed?” Atsushi didn’t sound convinced, but Ranpo brushed him off with a flick of his wrist.

“If anything, he is even more determined to do so. He couldn’t win against Chuuya alone last time – probably due to the surprise factor – but if they were to team up against him, he wouldn’t have a chance. We might catch him unprepared as well.”

“As if Erebus wouldn’t figure on us making a move. Also, let’s not forget, that it’s actually not only Erebus. Fyodor also mentioned some kind of army; so far, we have no other information on it. For all we know he could be surrounded by a bunch of ghosts and demons next time,” Yosano crossed her arms in front of her chest as she made a point.

Chuuya listened. His brain failed to keep up with the facts and implications they threw around. How did they know all this?

Thank god Dazai just voiced the question and a dark flush rose on Atsushi’s nose as he rubbed his neck. “We might have paid Fyodor another visit this morning,” he murmured, barely loud enough.

“I thought we agreed on letting him sit there for a few days?” What had they been doing? Somehow it didn’t sit right with Chuuya that they had acted on their own on Dazai’s and his case. They should have at least informed them beforehand – but then, hadn’t they just agreed on that it wasn’t only their case anymore?

“And he actually talked to you?” Dazai sounded positively irritated by that. The ghost had been so adamant to only talk to him the day prior, what changed?

An evil grin appeared Ranpo’s lips. “While we cannot really harm him or extinguish him, bites from a hellish dog can even hurt a ghost until he’s begging for mercy.”

Chuuya sucked in air sharply, somewhat pleased at the answer he received. Served him well, that asshole.

“I also want to mention that we’ve officially closed the missing people case,” Atsushi begun hesitantly, as if unsure if his words would be even heard out, “Fyodor admitted to have abducted
them in order to feed their soul to Erebus.”

“That explains the sea of blood at the temple,” Chuuya grumbled, still disgusted by the fact that he had indeed fallen into the gore. The urge to vomit arose at the thought.

“So let me sum it up,” Gin started, “Now that Asmodeus and Fyodor are out of the game, only Erebus and his unknown underlings remain. We also can assume that Erebus is after Dazai but won’t make a move on him as long as Chuuya is around.”

Dazai hummed in agreement.

“Then we just have to find Erebus before he finds either Chuuya or Dazai. We can be prepared,” Chuuya almost wanted to laugh at Gin’s enthusiasm. The last thing Chuuya wished for was to encounter the demon ever again, despite knowing it would be inevitable.

“But how do we find him?” Atsushi asked.

For a brief moment, Dazai shifted beneath Chuuya, who already intended to complain about being disturbed in his comfortable position, but then Dazai apparently noticed the additional weight and sat back again. “Gin, can you grab me the notes on the kitchen table?”

She quickly jumped on her feet and came back with a stack of paper in hand, handing them over to Dazai. Chuuya craned his neck to have a look at them as well and he quickly understood which notes Dazai was searching for – The ones he made about summoning a high-ranking demon.

When he finally found them, he broke the anticipating silence. “The issue is, that Erebus has already been summoned, which means we cannot summon him up randomly anywhere. It just doesn’t work.”

Yosano voiced her thoughts somewhat annoyed, “That doesn’t matter as long as we can get him to come to us. Just tell us where we could summon him.”

A finger ran down the paper until it stopped on a sentence. Dazai read out loud. “To conjure a demon that has already been summoned, a place where its extra-mundane energy reaches high levels has to be located. The conjuring-spell is mostly to be found within an inscription that the demon left once behind due to inescapable structures within demonic curses.”

“Your flat.” Ranpo made sure to catch everyone’s attention. “I doubt the demon would likely reappear at the temple after what happened. But Erebus raided your entire apartment block, his energy should be pretty high in there, don’t you think?”

Nodding slowly, Dazai hummed in agreement. “I haven’t thought about that yet but it makes sense. What I’ve heard from Chuuya is that he rampaged there a lot.”

“Yes, and we also might find the incantation in the inscriptions on the walls. I haven’t finished translation the one’s I’ve found in the bedroom, but I would say it’s most likely to be hidden there, Asmodeus’ head was there too.” With a shudder Chuuya remembered the severed head which lead to his thoughts going astray and remember the kiss he shared with Dazai and the situation they both were in now and how he hadn’t gotten the chance to –

“All we have to do is to come up with a plan that has the highest chance of everyone surviving the eviction.” Akutagawa interrupted his head-rumbling. While he agreed with his friend, who had a hand around Atsushi’s, he despised the implication in the idea. He scowled at him, brows deeply furrowed but before he could pick up a fight, Dazai gently nudged him with an elbow as if to calm him down. Chuuya got it, right now wasn’t the time to argue. They had to work with whatever they
had and make the best out of it.

A few hours and many notepads later, when the sun had long disappeared, they had come up with a plan they all considered solid. It had its loopholes, the risk of losing someone or somebody getting injured during the fight still present despite the precautions they had agreed on; however, it was the best they could draw up. Erebus moves unpredictably, they had to make guesses as well as plan through numerous outcomes until the most satisfactory posed the likely outcome.

When the guests rose to their feet, saying good-bye for now, Chuuya shoved them out of the door more eagerly than intended but their presence had drained his energy to such an extent, that every wrong word could have caused him to snap and just yell at the entire world. Frustrated with their current situation, he hated even thinking about the upcoming day of redemption. Why had it to be so complicated?

The door fell shut and then it was just Dazai and him again, both not only physically drained anymore but mentally too.

Dazai was sitting on the couch cross-legged, balancing the sheets on his knees as he tried to go over the plan again for what must have been the hundredth time tonight. Silence filled the room except for the occasional turn of pages.

Chuuya leaned against the door, watching him silently. He knew Dazai wasn’t focused anymore, but merely tried to occupy his mind to distract him from what was really buzzing through his genius head.

Brown locks fell into Dazai’s face, covering those brilliant but tired eyes; yet he didn’t bother to brush them aside. In Chuuya’s eyes, he was beautiful and the sight of the so homely scene, Dazai in his apartment as if he just belonged there, reminded him of the moment just before their friends had burst their bubble.

But all the courage Chuuya had managed to build up earlier had evaporated into thin air and been replaced with doubt. The intuition he had didn’t seem as plausible now as it had before. If he was wrong and made a move now, the awkwardness would most likely tamper their plan in a negative way. He couldn’t risk that, not when they were close, so close, to finishing off the case. It would be selfish to put his own emotions over the lives of all of them and their safety. Maybe it just wasn’t meant to be.

As he pushed himself off the door, he groaned at his aching muscles, causing Dazai to look up.

Chuuya wondered how he could see anything from behind those bangs.

“We’ve made a lot of progress today,” Dazai said as his gaze followed Chuuya who walked into the kitchen. “I just hope it goes as planned.”

“Not only you,” Chuuya replied as he opened the kitchen cabinets, “but I think we’ve done enough today. Do you want something to eat? I’m going to cook dinner.” Concentrating on a task he was familiar with would take his mind of, at least he believed so. He didn’t have a lot in storage currently, but it would suffice to make a decent meal.

Dazai nodded and got up from his place, just to jump on the kitchen counter close to where Chuuya began chopping vegetables. They sat in silence for a while, Dazai watching Chuuya, Chuuya focused on cooking.

“Do you think it will be over then?”
Chuuya almost hadn’t heard him, too engrossed in preparing dinner. His stomach dropped at his words. It wasn’t like Dazai to sound so insecure. Turning around, he realized that he was seeing Dazai how he had witnessed him the day after dinner.

Open. Honest. Vulnerable. And looking for comfort – that only Chuuya could and wanted to provide.

The smell of garlic filled the kitchen and Chuuya put the knife aside to face Dazai properly.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I don’t know enough about demons in general or about Erebus to know. But I sincerely hope so. For our sake and especially for ours. Maybe we can put his to an end.”

He gnawed on his lower lip as Dazai nodded slowly, thinking about what Chuuya had said. It was nothing but honest, and Chuuya hoped Dazai knew that.

Sighing deeply, Dazai closed his eyes. “I just don’t know if I can do it.”

He didn’t have to elaborate further, Chuuya understood what he meant anyway.

“I know you’re afraid. Don’t even try to deny it. I know you’re afraid of everything repeating, afraid of us getting hurt, afraid of dying. But you’ve survived last time, when you were on your own. You aren’t now. You have us. We’re here to protect each other, making sure everything goes right. And you have me by your side. *I’ll* keep you safe. Dazai, look at me. You are not alone in this.”

His voice thinned out as he spoke, air leaving him and refusing to return. As if the gravity of the situation finally hit him, the situation became real as he spoke it out aloud. His breath turned heavy against his will, but out of a sudden, everything overwhelmed him. All the fear and pain and anxiety and lo-

Lifting his chin to meet Chuuya’s eyes, Dazai pursed his lips, almost as if he didn’t agree with Chuuya’s words. Slowly, he tilted his head, holding his gaze as sadness flashed through his eyes.

“You are wrong in one thing,” Dazai said, confusing Chuuya, who fought to breath calmly. What had he misunderstood?

“I am not afraid of dying. I’ve never been. I am afraid of *you* dying.”

Chuuya’s breath hitched, his stomach dropped. That didn’t make any sense. He must have gotten it wrong. But he didn’t get to say anything because Dazai had yet to finish.

“I regret a lot of things I did in my life. And I have come to terms with the fact that I can’t reverse anything of what I’ve done and that won’t bother me in my death if I really shouldn’t survive. But there is one thing I would regret not having done, and I just couldn’t rest with knowing I never even tried.”

Dazai’s gaze flicked to Chuuya’s lips as he cradled his face with one hand ever so gently. A thumb caressed his cheekbones, wiping away a silent tear, and the next moment, Dazai closed the distance between them and pulled Chuuya into a kiss.

Time stood still. It was nothing like the first one they shared. Their lips met softly, almost shyly, making Chuuya’s insides flutter. His heart was ready to burst through his chest, beating incredibly fast. Before Chuuya could react, Dazai had already pulled back, looking at him questioningly, expectantly. As if asking for permission.
A second passed, Chuuya’s brain rebooted, realizing what had just happened. For a brief moment, they stood there, waiting and processing what it meant. But Chuuya didn’t want to wait. Hadn’t he waited long enough?

He didn’t have to think twice to draw him close again and into a second kiss, much more confident and demanding. And yet it felt purer than the last one, Chuuya’s head clear and being sure that this was exactly what he wanted. Their lips left each other less and less while Dazai made sure to let Chuuya feel what he couldn’t articulate, wanting to make it count; and Chuuya believed him. He knew he could.

They had thrown away any doubt and hesitation in favor of letting raw feelings speak, allowing themselves to admit that they had longed for this, and maybe, Chuuya thought, maybe, this was meant to be.

They parted too soon. Chuuya still hadn’t enough of this newly discovered pleasure of the taste of Dazai’s lips. But seeing with how much genuine affection Dazai looked at him, it was alright. It said more than any words ever could. Dazai had offered him a part of himself and Chuuya would make sure to treasure it no less than it deserved.

Leaning forward, smile not ceasing, Dazai rested his forehead against Chuuya’s, who finally found his voice again. He wasn’t sure whom he tried to convince, but he would never let this be taken away from him. “We’re both going to make it. We’re both going out of there, because this is what we deserve. We deserve to be happy.”

Chuuya nuzzled Dazai’s hand as he spoke.

Dazai sighed, hot breath against Chuuya’s skin. “I just hope that after it, we can be happy together.”

“I know we will be,” Chuuya whispered. Then he kissed Dazai again in an attempt of making up for all the time they had let pass.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Feel free to leave a kudo or a comment if you want to.
*goes to hide now*
Social Media: Fenriel's Instagram
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hello again!
Chapter 16, the second to last chapter... i can't even believe that we've come this far.
This is the final 'real' chapter. This is were things go down. The following one will tie
some loose ends.
Thank you for everyone who has stayed with me so far and followed the progress of
the story! My gratitude is beyond words <3
Enjoy!

TW: blood, past abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five days. That's how much time they took for preparations, how much time they allowed
themselves to get ready – not only physically but mentally as well.

Everyone of their group did their best to contribute as much as possible, from trying to cast spells
and wards to organizing more extra-mundane weapons. Atsushi made sure that the police would
stay away from the building the entire day, Yosano busied herself with most of the protection-
spells and Akutagawa and Gin came up with various defense-strategies and safety-plans for
numerous different outcomes. At some point, Dazai and Chuuya felt literally useless as the others
went as far as to forbid them helping, but instead insisted that they had to get into the right state of
mind for the battle as most of the burden would lie on their shoulders.

That both of them might have wanted that distraction to busy themselves with anything but the
anxiety that threatened to well up whenever they were left alone with their thoughts apparently
didn’t come to their minds.

Dazai and Chuuya spent the remaining days using their spare time together as best as they could.
Of course, they took care of some organizational matters, arranging and discussing the plans as
well, but every free second was used to enjoy each other’s company, cuddled up on Chuuya’s
couch, sharing warmth and sneaking a kiss every now and then, while every thought about the
upcoming event was pushed aside as best as possible. When they talked, they were either in work-
mode and go over strategies or having a pointless discussion about silly stuff – Chuuya would
never understand how somebody could get that worked up about his closet arrangement, especially
someone who didn’t even have a real closet – but there was nothing in-between.

Chuuya actually suspected Yosano to have a hunch that something between Dazai and him must
have changed and therefore had banned them from work, but she never said anything outwardly.
Though he believed her to be empathetic enough to just know such things – she did strike him as
that kind of person.

Being with Dazai felt weird in its own way and at the same time it didn’t. They didn’t talk about
what they were, they simply co-existed, everything coming so naturally as if it had never been
different, just like when Dazai had first come to stay in Chuuya’s apartment. No one felt the need
to put a label on them; for now, it was good the way it was – hadn’t there been that one dark spot in
the upcoming future.
So it came that after five days there were all gathered up, excluding Atsushi and Ranpo, who had decided to patrol the area just in case someone came too close, in front of Dazai’s old building, still dirtied with now black blood.

Darkness had already engulfed the city, only the streetlights giving off some yellowish light to the dead streets. The biting air made Chuuya shiver, stinging with every fresh breeze. The coldness tugged at the sleeves of his hoodie and for a brief moment he wished for some warmer clothing before he remembered how restricting it would be later. Not much longer and he would be warm anyway.

Not a single soul wandered the area surrounding the high-rise building. Atsushi had pulled Kunikida into the boat and together they had faked a bomb alert, leading to an evacuation of the block. When he had heard, the relief Dazai felt had been visible and it had been the moment when Chuuya had realized how much of an impact the demon’s presence would have as soon as he would be defeated.

The silence that had settled did nothing to soothe the tension that put them all on alert.

When a hand reached for his own and interlocked their fingers, Chuuya actually flinched a little. He didn’t have to look to know it was Dazai, who stood close enough for their shoulders to brush. Turning a little to watch him, Chuuya noticed his tense shoulders and how his glistening gaze focused on the window where his flat had once been. But his mind seemed distant, far away in a memory unbeknownst to Chuuya. Dazai’s free hand fiddled with a necklace around his neck.

As much as he wished to take Dazai’s nightmares away, he knew he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t do more than to guide him through them, at day or at night.

One of Chuuya’s woolen scarfs wrapped around Dazai’s neck, he had pulled it up to cover the tip of his nose. Dazai was already freezing, his hands felt like ice-blocks, and it would only get worse the closer they came to the demon. Chuuya gave the hand a tight squeeze; he was there, they were here together.

“Boys, are you ready?”

Despite the soft and tentative tone, Gin’s voice startled Chuuya and he turned around a little too panicked.

Behind him stood Akutagawa, Yosano and Gin, every one holding onto a different set of weapons which they had requested and Rashoumon danced around Akutagawa’s legs, whimpering as if it knew that something big was coming up. The machete in Yosano’s grip reflected some of the spare light and illuminated her face, worry evident, and her free hand held onto a strap of the heavy bag on her back. Gin carried the second rucksack.

He nodded as he hid his hand in the pocket of his sweater, pulling Dazai’s hand along with his own to keep it warm, while the other reached for his jeans pocket, feeling for a tiny piece of paper.

He let out a strained breath. “There’s no reason for us to wait any longer. We’ve done everything we could do ahead. The rest depends on what happens next.”

The others exchanged concerned glances. Chuuya knew they were nervous, they all were. But Dazai and he had given them the opportunity to back out more than once the past days, repeating over and over again that they didn’t have to join them in the fight. Nobody expected them to risk their own lives for a battle that shouldn’t actually be theirs to fight.
They had insisted.

Gin let her head fall back to look up to the roof of the building. “Do you think he expects us to come for him?”

Chuuya couldn’t answer that. He didn’t know. He had no way of knowing how omniscient the demon was or what his plans included.

But apparently something had already struck Dazai, his face suddenly paling. “He’s close. He feels my presence.”

Swallowing down a curse, Chuuya started rubbing circles into Dazai’s palm. While not ideal, they had foreseen that case and prepared accordingly. That wouldn’t distract them from their plans.

Taking a brave step forward, Yosano was the first to move and to break the anticipation. “Then let’s bring it on.” She didn’t look back anymore and the other’s followed her, approaching the building. Chuuya wanted to trail behind her as well, but a tug on his hand held him back. Dazai hadn’t moved, but instead pulled Chuuya closer again.

They didn’t need any words to tell what they wanted to say. Soft lips on Chuuya’s, desperation mixing with affection, worry melding with trust. The kiss didn’t last long, just long enough.

It was time.

They hurried after their friends, hands slipping out of their hold on each other, sealing the beginning of the night.

Reaching the others, Yosano was just about to push the door open, which immediately bulged under the pressure, Atsushi having made sure that it wouldn’t be locked tonight. The yellow tape had been removed at some point, and they entered the house without complication.

Complete silence met them. Not even wind rustled the plastic bags that lay in some corners but yet the temperature dropped severely inside. Chuuya clenched his teeth when he inhaled the icy air.

Dim light from outside illuminated the hallway. To Chuuya’s surprise, the scene hadn’t changed a lot since he last had been there.

Originally, he had expected it to be cleaner, but nobody had taken upon the work of doing so. The blood specks had dried down to an almost black color like on the outside wall and from some areas a sickening smell descended. Sloppy work was very unlike the police department and it would have made Chuuya suspicious hadn’t Atsushi told them that the department hadn’t categorized the clean-up as required urgently, all of the inhabitants dead or allegedly missing in action.

Dazai took lead, fully concentrated now. The glassy sheen on the eyes had disappeared. He was paving a way through dust and dirt to a massive door at the end of the short hallway. Reaching into his pocket he fiddled for some keys, then unlocked it and it opened to pitch black void.

Akutagawa turned his flashlight on before anyone else could; although, it didn’t make a huge difference. Most of the staircase remained in the dark.

“Yosano,” Dazai addressed the woman, tone stern, “are you sure to have brought everything?”

“Positive.”

She had checked the bag every five minutes on their way here until even Chuuya knew she had
collected everything, but he figured that it were Dazai’s nerves acting up that had him ask once more.

“Here goes nothing,” he mumbled and with that Dazai descended into the darkness, Chuuya following a few steps behind. He fished for his own flashlight in his back-pocket, which helped a little to distinguish the wooden stairs.

The scene had an unmistakable similarity to when he had explored the temple and Chuuya almost believed to smell iron despite subconsciously knowing it was a mere product of his imagination. Still, it unsettled him. Deep breaths only helped so much to console the nervous twisting in his stomach.

“Geeeee,” Akutagawa hushed, “how deep is your cellar going down?”

Chuuya had to agree. They seemed to be walking for minutes now.

“Quite, they had to dig deeper several years ago due to some issues with ground-water or something like that,” Dazai replied. As he finished the sentence the sound of his steps changed to something duller, indicating that they had reached the end.

Not wasting any more time, Gin already pulled the torches out of her bag and handed one to each of them. If Chuuya had had a choice, he would have preferred to use flashlights to light up the room, but Dazai had insisted on using fire to avoid any complications when calling Erebus, not daring to deviate from the instructions he had read in the books.

When everyone’s steps echoed through the more or less empty room, only some wooden boxes stacked against the wall, Chuuya realized that while it had been quiet upstairs, the real silence resided down there. He found no words to describe the difference, but if he had to, he would call it thicker. And chillier.

One flame after the other lit up, revealing the considerable size of the room, and the fire warmed his hands, but he couldn’t relish it, already swirling around and returning to the middle.

Yosano had poured out the contents of her bag on the ground, and the items had now to be arranged in the needed way. Some of them really appalled Chuuya. He knew it was necessary, but the picture of Yosano stealing blood from the corpses in the pathology closed up his throat.

Dazai had already reached for the chalk and begun drawing a large circle, then he filled it out with a pentagram. Gin lit up several candles, arranging them at the points of the star and wherever the lines crossed. Akutagawa took it upon himself to draw three perfect circles in each other with salt, then repeating that, his demon pet following him by the heel.

Yosano drew some more symbols, having found them in Dazai’s books, around the pentagram and the salt rings which should serve to keep the demon contained for at least a few minutes and hinder him from cursing them altogether. That had been Dazai’s greatest fear concerning their involvement – the worst that could happen, he had said, would be that they all got cursed as well. It had been Yosano’s idea to look up protective wards that linked to religion, which would prevent that from happening.

However, it made Chuuya feel only minimally better. None of them had ever tried to use them and they had no way of finding out beforehand if they really worked, leaving them to gamble with luck. A quiet voice in the back of his head prepared to pray.

Only Chuuya himself had been inhibited from helping with the set up. Dazai had claimed a too
high risk of Chuuya shifting the extra-mundane energy surrounding the circle. Despite Chuuya arguing that he had enough control over his ability to keep that from happening, Dazai still didn’t want him anywhere near the pentagram.

“Stop pouting.” Dazai’s voice had Chuuya rip his gaze away from everyone working.

“I am not.”

A shadow darkened half of Dazai’s face and it almost scared Chuuya how exhausted he appeared in the dim light.

“Yes, you are.” Gin agreed with Dazai as she lit up the last candle, “Your time will come later. For now, leave it to us.”

How could they care about his facial expression now? They should focus on tasks. Any mistake, no matter how small, could be fatal to their mission. Chuuya wouldn’t waste his energy arguing with them and obediently stepped back, silently observing the scene.

Hadn’t the situation been so serious, the picture painted on the floor could have been beautiful if one wasn’t to consider its real meaning. But knowing what came next, it only triggered a bitter taste in Chuuya’s mouth. He didn’t even notice when his knees begun trembling a little and when he did, he shifted his weight around to stand steadier. Weakness wouldn’t bring him anywhere tonight.

Yosano finished last.

“Everything done?” Dazai asked, making sure that nobody had forgotten anything. He had taken charge of the situation, the others glad to be given orders; his hesitancy had dissolved but Chuuya noted his too stiff movements.

A last check, then everyone gave their assurance.

“Get into the rings, we’re doing this now.”

Clattering noise filled the room as everybody picked up their chosen weapons, then hurried into the circles, careful not to destroy them in the process.

Before Dazai could voice the next order, Chuuya had already pulled out the sheet from his pocket and handed it to him, his arms shaking ever so slightly. The paper rustled as Dazai unfolded it. His eyes skimming over the neatly written but short text, they widened a little when Dazai comprehended the words.

He had refused to read the translations before he would actually need it; therefore, he had left finding the incantation to Chuuya and Ranpo. Ranpo had picked apart every single line and word, pointed out every mistake Chuuya could have possibly made until he was convinced that they had gotten it right.

“And you are sure the translation will be enough?” Despite having asked the exact same question at least ten times already, Chuuya remained skeptic.

Dazai nodded. “Believe me, chances are much higher if we do it in English. My demonic is nonexistent, I wouldn’t pronounce a single correct word and out chances of succeeding would be null.”

Accepting the answer, even if doubtfully, Chuuya got into his circle and stood still. Now it was
Dazai’s turn.

“Mori has done it in English too…”

Chuuya’s chest tightened. Dazai may have not wanted him to, but he had heard, and the sadness, the sorrow that tainted the outspoken memory, might it have been only one short sentence, pained Chuuya. Dazai was giving away so much of himself right now, without hesitation. That was Dazai; he wouldn’t ever let any vulnerability show around his friends, always keeping up the strong facet, providing security to those who lacked. All while he forgot himself.

Chuuya didn’t get the chance to comfort him a last time.

Dazai held up a transparent vial, filled with rich blood. Slowly, he walked around the pentagram, letting one bead drop onto each point into the fire. When the last one hit the ground, the priorly small flames doubled in size with a hissing. The final drop in the bottle trickled onto the back of his hand.

Thrown into the middle, a strand of pitch-black hair, taken from the original conjurer, was added and the flames grew again.

Unable to do anything, being forced to stay back and watch, didn’t bode well with Chuuya. It tortured him. But as much as he desired to grab Dazai, pull him away from the circle, from everything and into safety, he knew that he just couldn’t do that.

And then Dazai’s attention turned to the words on the paper. His voice didn’t waver when he read them out loud.

*Down the depths of inferno I reach,*

*Retrieving the to be bound,*

*Stolen by ignoble infantry,*

*I drink and redeem what should ascend*

*In the presence of me alone.*

Chuuya bit into his lower lip when Dazai licked the final drop from his skin, swallowing down without second thought. The flames burst.

Squinting to protect his sight, Chuuya saw Dazai stumbling backwards and away from the fire that now surpassed Dazai’s size and lashed out at him. They crackled and moved violently as if something tried to push them out of its way, but for now, they burnt brightly and consistently. Chuuya hoped it would remain like that.

A deep growl had Chuuya’s skin prickle. He recognized the agonizing sound immediately, not any less intimidating than the last time. The noise impacted not only him.

Yosano’s expression had fallen into sheer disbelief. Akutagawa held tightly onto Rashoumon and Chuuya could only hope Gin would stay put. The chance to back out had passed.

At first, Chuuya thought he was imagining it but then he realized; the floor actually quaked. When
a hear-ripping bang echoed through the room, he threatened to lose balance and he caught himself just in time or he would have disrupted the salt.

Chucking. Low and guttural and not human at all.

It hadn’t been the noise that had gotten the others on the edge. Amidst the circle, trapped by the flames, a tall figure had manifested. It looked just as Chuuya remembered, terrifying and disgusting at the same time. What was new, however, was the split in the demon’s skull, putting the black horns wider apart.

He should have been afraid. Nervous. Angry. Should have felt anything. But instead, Chuuya felt numb towards the demon. All in front of his eyes was the goal to extinguish the creature.

Dazai froze in place, fear written all over his face. Chuuya recognized the dullness in his gaze, the darkness that clouded the otherwise so bright eyes. Dazai had capsuled into a state of mind where he was relegated all those years. No, not now. Dazai needed to come back, they needed him there, in the present. No time could be lost. Chuuya wanted to scream, to yell at him, but his voice gave up on him, strained from worry.

Rashomon let out a bark that repelled from the walls and thankfully, Dazai winced. Still at unease, but he was back, life returning into his eyes as he collected himself to stand tall.

The paper got thrown into the flames and Erebus laughed. “I knew you would come to me eventually.” The demon made no move on breaking out of his confinement again, for now.

“You know I am not here to follow you,” Dazai said firmly, chin raising a little higher, “You aren’t foolish enough to believe that.”

“Are you foolish enough to believe you have a chance against me. Do you really think so highly of yourself?” The demonic voice went right under Chuuya’s skin. He wanted to do something. To rip the demon’s head off. To kill him on the spot. But he had to stick to the plan. Anything else would endanger all of them.

Blue light collected in Dazai’s hands. “Things have changed since then,” he brought out between gritted teeth.

“You can’t think that your pets will save you or kill me.” Ember started to seep from between the scales on Erebus’s skin.

“I’ve heard it’s been a close call.” Dazai’s ability brightened and Chuuya was on alert now. He watched the demon’s every movement and was ready to act any second. Everything to protect Dazai. As much as they relied on each other, without Dazai the entire mission would fail - he was the key to their success.

The demon let his gaze wander, looking at everyone around him. When his soulless eyes lastly landed on him, Chuuya snarled, a ting of fury flashing up inside him. His own ability breached the surface and his fingers coated in red. Chuuya swore he saw something akin to amusement in the monster’s face.

“I see you brought your most loyal dog as well. I must say, he holds quite the bit of power. But his body isn’t strong enough. If he has no control, how much is his life even worth then?”

What had happened to his alleged plan of terminating Chuuya?

Dazai wasn’t taking any more of it. With a brave step forward, Dazai brought his glowing hand up
to his chest. “I think it’s time for your reign to end.”

With a sharp tug he ripped the necklace from his body, his fingers closing around the crucifix that dangled from the chain, and began to pray. Chaos erupted.

The flames around the pentagram rose even higher, reaching almost to the ceiling and Chuuya wanted to bolt forward and put himself between the fire and Dazai, but a loud bang behind him captured his attention that moment.

Under the light of a torch a creature had appeared, which Chuuya immediately identified as another demon. It wasn’t quite as tall as Erebus and lacked the humanity in appearance, looking more like a snake.

Instinctively, Chuuya made a step back. That’s when he left the salt circle and the snake took upon the opportunity to charge at him.

Orbs of red fired at the creature, flung it against the wall, causing it to shake. That must be one of Erebus’ minions, and damn it, they were determined.

In the periphery of his view, Chuuya vaguely recognized that the others were under attack as well, each one fighting either a demon or – to his surprise – a ghost. They were gruesomely looking, stuck in the form they had died in. Half-severed limbs tried to get ahold of Gin, who did her best at keeping the figure at bay.

His shield built up before anything else came to close to him. The monsters came without break. As soon as one was defeated, the next one already lashed out. One creature after another approached him. One creature after another was ripped apart by red flashes of energy.

Something tried to attack Chuuya from his left. He didn’t see it coming. It hit his shield full force, the impact shattering it and Chuuya struck the thing just in time to stay unharmed. The next second, another demon snatched his leg, digging its teeth deeply into his flesh. Chuuya had to shoot a flash of red to get it to let go. The holes in his leg burnt, putting weight on the leg hurt even more, but he had to put it down. He would have fallen otherwise when the ghost appeared out of thin air next to him and sung a sword at him.

Somebody – or something, Chuuya couldn’t tell - screamed.

More and more creatures gathered around him. With every one new that appeared, Chuuya felt the extra-mundane energy increasing around him, causing prickling electricity to flow through his veins.

Where did they all come from?

Chuuya was a flurry of red, orbs shooting from his hands in an astonishing speed, his palms considerably hot, but it wasn’t enough. A knife grazed his shoulder, thick blood flowing from the cut.

They had surrounded him. He had no way out; the only remaining option was to fight back. The closer they came, the more energy he received. But he couldn’t put it to use. The enemies tightened the circle around him, taking away the space he needed to carry out his attacks.

Demons, ghosts, all of them gruesome and alike, shielded away the torches’ light and Chuuya got constrained by growing darkness. Panic rose. He barely managed to keep the claws and teeth off his body and soon he wouldn’t be able to move. They were drowning him. They were taking away the air to breathe. The energy that collected in the room now posed a crushing pressure to him. If
he didn’t gain control of the situation soon, he would have no other option than to make the final move.

“Chuuya!” A shrill voice cut through the noise the creatures made and a silver flash appeared amidst the mass. Several bodies were cut in half, straight through the middle and light opened to Chuuya again.

Wielding her machete, Yosano herself glowed violet. He saw the rips and cuts in her clothes, but she seemed unharmed.

She dashed forward to reach for his wrist. It went down so quickly; he barely realized the purple flash that emerged at her touch. Then, some of the pain in his body yielded, a wave of relief overcoming Chuuya.

For more, there was no time. The creatures had already surrounded them again and back to back, they both readied for the next offensive.

“What’s happening? Why are they all around you?” Yosano yelled over the growls and snarls, her weapon raised.

Chuuya collected more energy to increase his ability’s power. “Erebus’s way of keeping me away from Dazai. I can’t do anything like that!” He shouted back, kicking a cat-like mass of fluid into the stomach. “How are the other’s?” Breath labored, Chuuya pressed the words out. He needed to know.

“Not as occupied as you, standing strong. But I couldn’t find Dazai,” she brought out between grunts. One demon after another fell victim to her blade.

Chuuya’s stomach dropped, “How, you haven’t seen him? I need to get to him!”

He had to get out of this prison. Dazai needed him. What if Erebus had managed to get a grip on him? If Dazai wasn’t there anymore, then it was over. There would be nothing to be done anymore. Erebus would have succeeded and they could only pray to make it out.

Accidentally crashing into Chuuya’s back, Yosano gasped for air. She growled at the ghost who shoved her, then her machete severed his head. “Okay,” she said.

A red blast sent the closest enemies tumbling backwards.

The monsters had backed up a little, pausing as if to reconsider their next step. It opened a window for them and Yosano let her weapon drop. Getting into a crouch, she laid her hands out in front of her.

“Get on the boxes there, I’ll give you a shove.”

Comprehending her idea in a split second, he didn’t waste any time to step onto her palms and then he was pushed upwards. He jumped over the heads of some smaller demons, then landed on the lowest box that stacked against the wall. As soon as he regained balance, he ascended the tower, away from the nearing enemies and simultaneously taking in the scene from above.

Yosano battled unminds the circle of undead, though it had thinned out with Chuuya’s disappearance, some of them trying to climb the boxes now. Gin had successfully pinned four demons against a wall and currently stomped one’s head into the ground while Akutagawa pierced a sword through a ghost. Rashoumon had to be somewhere amongst the demons, Chuuya heard him barking.
But where was Dazai?

The flames around the pentagram had burned to the ground, it’s middle empty. How could he not even spot the beast?

An explosion lightened up the entire room. The bang caused his ears to ring, taking away his hearing. But he still kept his sight and there he saw Dazai – lying in the middle of the pentagram. Unmoving. Chuuya’s heart stood still before racing uncontrollably.

“Fuck!” This wouldn’t happen. That’s not part of their strategy – it just couldn’t end like this.

On the floor again, Chuuya dashed forward and towards the symbol, towards the person he cared about more than should.

He got several creatures out of his way which tried to grab him and bring him down. But Chuuya didn’t stop fighting back, aggressive flashes crushing them until he reached Dazai.

The shield that he built up surrounded them both and he dropped into a crouch next to the body.

He was alive. Chuuya knew, and his shoulders dropped as the intense worry eased as soon as his hands closed around an arm, Dazai stirring at the touch. A pained whimper passed Dazai’s lips when he rolled around to get on his knees.

It only now crossed Chuuya’s mind that Dazai had been gone, absent from the basement. Just as had Erebus been and still was.

Scanning his body, making sure no blood soaked Dazai’s clothes, Chuuya observed to his relief that Dazai was unharmed. But he was weak, almost unable to hold himself up. What had happened? Where had he been?

Something threw itself against the shield in an attempt to get to them, startling Chuuya who flinched at the impact but before he could react, it backed off, Gin routing it.

“Chuuya, be wary. He’ll return as every second now,” Dazai panted, lungs malfunctioning. “He’s weaker now, but not nearly as weak as he must be for us to defeat him. You know what you have to do.”

Speechless, letting the words and their meaning sink in, Chuuya then nodded. Their plan had been set, now he had to follow through. Under no circumstances Chuuya would let them down. Not when they’ve come this far. It took him every ounce of self-discipline to raise to his feet again with the next step already occupying his mind. He pulled Dazai up with him, who wobbled a little as he stood.

Inside their little bubble, an odd serenity had settled. All while amongst them, their friends fought the monsters to the best of their abilities as they tried to keep them at bay and away from Chuuya and Dazai. They were willing to gamble with their lives for them; now Chuuya’s time to return the favor had come.

The shield dropped, red light retracting to his hands and simultaneously, another explosion tore the atmosphere.

Erebus had reappeared. He had shrunken down a little, the fire between his scales gradually turned into smoke, but he was still standing and raging. The ground cracked when his heel stomped the ground. For a moment, everything went dead silent.
Hearing his own heartbeat, waiting for what would come next, Chuuya stepped in front of Dazai, shielding him from the demon. He didn’t dare attacking when he couldn’t predict the demon’s next move, but he wouldn’t let him aim for Dazai, not again.

Arrows of flames that manifested in the torches shot across the room, aiming right for their hearts. Gin cried out. Why, Chuuya didn’t see, heavy smoke ascending from the floor to take away his sight. He barely made out Dazai’s blue shield.

But he heard the arrows crossing the room. They hissed whenever they hit a wall.

Glances were exchanged, then a nod. It was time.

“Guys, NOW! Get out!” Dazai’s voice raspy, it enforced against the walls of grey.

“Understood!” Yosano shouted back.

One heart beat passed. A second one. They were still confined in Dazai’s ability and fumes. A third one.

Akutagawa provided assurance. “We are out!”

Chuuya couldn’t check if it was true. He had to build on their trust and that they were doing as agreed upon, because they couldn’t stay any longer. It would be Dazai, the demon and him.

He pushed the anguish into the back of his mind and allowed the energy in the room to seep through his skin, into his limbs and chest and entire body and to flow up his veins. He took in every drop of energy the room would give, heat now burning him from inside. The idea was a dangerous one, but they had come to the conclusion that it was their only option.

One last deep breath. Red light surrounded him. One last look into Dazai’s eyes that weren’t ready to let go. Dazai’s eyes closed. The shield fell.

Chuuya unleashed the fury.

*_**_*_*

Pictures of terror continued to plague his mind, despite knowing in theory that he had to focus on the current situation. But whatever Erebus had done, it had thrown him off so majorly that he didn’t feel attached to reality anymore. He was aware that he was moving and giving orders, apparently the correct ones even. He knew what Chuuya’s next step would be, feeling the heat radiating from his partner. Yet it all felt so far away.

Gruesome scenes kept flashing up in front of his eyes as if he had been put back in time just to relive everything again, the memories so fresh they could have happened just seconds ago.

All the smoke, the blood, the limbs. All the ear-ripping screams, begging for help. All the erupted chaos. The ripped off head of his best friend.

An explosion pulled him out of his head sharply, demanding caution and attentiveness.

Dazai had to get his shit together. They had made it this far; he couldn’t go slack on their mission and plans now. He had to be in the moment; if he missed the right time, they were doomed to fail
and Chuuya wouldn’t make it through the night.

When making the plan, everyone had been well aware how much responsibility Dazai would carry on his shoulders when the point of no return would be breached. Saying that they had felt bad would be an understatement, despite his insistence that he would handle it. In order to win the battle and to defeat Erebus, they had to take that step; no other plan provided an equal guaranty of success.

However, in actuality, it scared him. Not the fact that he could fall into the hands of the demon if he failed, but knowing that if he fell, Chuuya would too. Succumbing into the abyss of darkness would mean to have failed Chuuya. That’s what scared him the most – the threat of being the reason for Chuuya’s death.

And despite understanding what their plan meant in case of failing, Chuuya had put his life into Dazai’s hands without hesitation. He had been more than willing to sacrifice everything for Dazai to be freed and believed in him enough to trust Dazai to be his savior. Dazai owed them both to make it out of there alive.

An air-shattering bang pulled Dazai back into the dim basement. With taking a sharp breath, heavy air that tasted like burnt flesh filled his lungs.

A flash of red bolted towards the demon.

Arrows continued to cross the room, but Dazai couldn’t do anything than shield himself. Erebus’ focus needed to be on Chuuya alone or he might interfere when Dazai would be needed most. He should forget about Dazai’s presence all together.

With the other’s gone, the amount of demons in the room had decreased, only a few creatures had been doomed to stay. A few of them made an attempt of attacking Dazai, but with merely touching his shield they dissipated into puffs of ashes.

He didn’t waste any energy on actively fighting them but merely kept the wall up, the value of every shard of strength too high.

His gaze settled on the fury of red that had formed. Dazai couldn’t stop the rising restlessness as he took in the form that once had been human. He struggled with making out his partner in the middle of the orb that moved with a speed so supernormal, it was hard to follow it around.

Once second a derivative orb hit the demon in his side. The next Chuuya aimed directly at his shoulder, leaving a gaping hole behind.

The creature roared in agony. As it built up flames to start a counterattack, Chuuya already cut through the demon’s leg. It brought him out of balance and Chuuya used the opportunity to aim another ball of energy directly at the demon’s chest.

The scene a mesmerizing one, Dazai had no idea how much consciousness actually drove Chuuya’s actions instead of natural instinct. Although it played no role as long as Chuuya achieved their goal.

The assaults on Dazai had ceased, giving him enough freedom to concentrate on the fight fully, always looking out for the moment he had to step in. He couldn’t allow himself to be as late as he had been last time. At the thought alone, nausea crept up Dazai’s throat.

The picture of a dark figure above him, horned and winged, flashed up in front of his eyes. It took away his breath while blue light cut off everything around him. Not again.
Dazai shook his head violently, desperate to get those memories out of his mind.

A loud noise took away his hearing briefly.

He tried to concentrate on Chuuya again but realized that the demon had been brought to the ground. The red mass hovered above him, waiting before it made another move. Why was Chuuya waiting? Erebus was already recollecting his strength, Dazai saw his leg grow again in a mass of black smoke. And still Chuuya hesitated.

What held him back? Chuuya needed to move, they were losing valuable time.

With the demon on the ground, caged by Chuuya, Dazai slowly dared to approach the scene.

The room had turned threateningly silent, the hissing of ember, crackling of fire and swishing of Chuuya’s ability along with his footsteps on the concrete ground the only heard sounds. All the other creatures had vanished, leaving them alone in the basement. Yet it felt as if he didn’t belong in there anymore as well.

The extra-mundane energy balled up around the demon and Chuuya, aggressively forming different colored fumes that fought for the upper hand. Dazai didn’t have the courage yet to get in contact with that, not until he knew what battle they were fighting.

He had come close enough to make out the forms more defined. He gulped down drily.

Blood already seeped from Chuuya’s nostrils, indicating that he wouldn’t withstand the power much longer. Dazai’s hands were still bound. If he got Chuuya down now, Erebus would regenerate, but if he let Chuuya continue, his partner wouldn’t survive. He didn’t want it to end either way.

Terror in his heart, turmoil in his mind.

Searching for a solution for what was going on, his thoughts rattled down in erratic speed. He came up blank. Nothing he could think of could explain the situation. What had Erebus done to Chuuya? Why wasn’t he moving?

A loud growl cut the air in half. At first Dazai feared Erebus to have evoked anew. Then the bright light around Chuuya increased and his eyes rolled back until fully white. Some of Chuuya’s light retracted in loss of energy.

Dazai’s hands balled into fists in fear and exasperation. Chuuya was leaving him already. There just had to be something that he could do. Erebus needed to let Chuuya go. He was holding onto him.

Something sharp poked him into his palm and he opened it hastily to be reminded of the necklace that he still held on to tightly.

The cross, it’s been sacred.

Crossing the orbital of foreign e.m.e., Dazai threw the metal directly the crack on the demon’s shoulder. Sparks emitted. Dazai didn’t hear the pained scream anymore.

“Chuuya, through his chest!” He just hoped his voice was loud enough for Chuuya to heard him.

A cut on Chuuya’s cheek began bleeding. His eyes rolled back into position and for a brief moment they locked with Dazai’s.
A black arrow of energy aimed for Dazai. The next moment it recoiled from Dazai’s shield.

Simultaneously, a blinding red orb of energy bolted down, ripping a massive hole into the middle of Erebus’ chest. Waves of heat and fumes ascended.

A hand grabbed a wrist, touching raw flesh, then violet light engulfed them both.

Chuuya dropped onto the ground, barely remaining on his knees and heaving, but able to keep himself up. Heat radiated from him but Dazai couldn’t care less when he wrapped his arms around him and pressed him into his chest. Weak hands clenched Dazai’s shirt.

Dazai had succeeded, Chuuya had made it and a small chunk of anxiety fell from his chest, realizing the severity of what having mastered that step meant.

Red smoke cleared, revealing the demonic body, deeply tortured but still functioning. Erebus was still alive, but on the verge of liquidating. A silvery orb pulsed where his chest lacked substance and while hating to, Dazai let go of Chuuya. His task wasn’t done yet.

Straightening his back, Dazai advanced towards the demon, the figure that has taunted his life for years and posed an ever-present silent fear in Dazai’s mind. Getting the chance to put it all to an end… He had never even dared to wish for such an opportunity. His ability already collected around his hands, unable to await executing the final part of their mission. Tonight, he was the one to look down at the demon.

Laying there, too weak to even dissolve and vanish, liquid colored like mercury flowed out of the gaping hole where the light of the silver orb decreased steadily along with Erebus’ life-force. But as long as the core existed, the demon would regenerate, no matter how deeply injured.

Never before had he seen the central element that kept a demon moving, but it appeared mesmerizing, even in that moment. It’s color unique in its own way, he couldn’t even describe if it was liquid, light or a solid form. But what did it matter?

It needed to be destroyed. When he was about to make a move, another flashback sent an unutterable wave of pain through his head.

Lost souls scurried in the room, searching for an escape before they would be consumed. A familiar body lay lifelessly next to him, red blood coloring the already red hair darker. Glowing eyes staring at him, not letting him out of sight and then the sharp pain that cut through his skin came. Incomparable with anything he had ever experienced.

Dazai fought back into reality, forcing himself to think about something that reminded him of his current life. He thought about the one thing that made him dare to hope for a brighter future.

The pain didn’t yield, his sides suddenly ached more than they had the entire night. The pain almost brought him to his knees. Determination crossed his expression as he bit his lip to stay concentrated. Almost. He wouldn’t cave.

Erebus had lost his horns during the fight, the once glorious wings now only carried a few feathers and rips and holes covered his body. All in all, he was nothing but pathetic. Nothing of the priorly so powerful creature remained and it had a smile creep up Dazai’s lips. The blue ability lit up enough to blind, its power – **his** own – on display.

“You know, you might have been right,” Dazai started. He didn’t know what drove him to speak to the creature, when he actually wanted to get it over. But the satisfaction it brought tempted him. “I might be not strong enough to defeat you on my own. But other than last time, I am not alone. You
can’t defeat the hatred of multiple people at once.”

The demon didn’t respond, apparently not strong enough to form a word, to Dazai’s luck. He doubted he would have been able to hear that voice ever again without losing his mind completely. They had fought so hard, had put so much sweat, tears and effort just to come this far.

One of his hands stretched back towards where Chuuya should still lay and a few moments later he felt Chuuya’s warm grip on his shoulder, searching and offering security at the same time.

Dazai took a last, deep breath full of ashes and grease. He felt his heart beating against his ribcage. “Don’t let go,” he muttered. Chuuya responded with a squeeze.

Dazai reached out for the core, clasping it with both hands. That’s when the walls broke down.

*_**_**

Hours seemed to have passed until the air appeared to clear, although Chuuya knew in reality it must have been bare minutes. Neither had let go of the other yet, nor had they dared to open their eyes to see the extend of the damage.

Only when he heard footsteps in the debris of the former building, Chuuya comprehended that they must have weathered the explosion. Turning his head to get Dazai’s hair out of his sight, he blinked his eyes open, taking in the area surrounding them through the shield of their abilities that swirled around them, mingled smoke and ribbons that colored the area in a bright violet.

Nothing of the building that once had stood highly remained, all the walls had crashed down and collected around them, around their little bubble. Some traces of gleam kept up persistently, but they were extinguished with the nightly breeze sooner or later.

The smell that the air carried had similarities to sulfur and fire. Overall it smelled like power which continue to crackle in the atmosphere.

Chuuya made out someone’s silhouette that had stopped several feet away from them. They were safe to move.

He nudged Dazai softly who squirmed under the pressure but then untangled his limbs from Chuuya’s to sit up straighter. Chuuya watched him taking in the scene just as he had done, but now he was observing Dazai. Dirt clung to every inch of him and not yet dried blood tainted the sweater around his ribcages. He was breathing unevenly and heavily. But he was alive and the realization made Chuuya smile wholeheartedly, feeling so much lighter. This hell of a night was over and they still stood strong.

Finally, Dazai put is gaze on him and the next second two cold hands cupped Chuuya’s jaw.

“Hey, don’t cry, please,” he pleaded, a shocked expression on his face where smudged of black were drawn across and brows furrowed in concern.

Chuuya placed his own hand on top of Dazai’s, seeing the open wounds that spread on his entire arm. They didn’t hurt.

“Am I?” He hadn’t noticed the silent tears that rolled down his cheeks, didn’t feel the salt burning
Dazai nodded, brows pinched in worry, “You don’t have to, there’s no reason to. We’ve made it, we’re alive.” A thumb wiped away a tear ever so gently. Chuuya’s smile only widened and a laugh bubbled up inside of him, so freely like it hadn’t done in days, the pressure on his chest gone and allowing him to take the first real breath in what felt like forever.

More tears kept coming. The dam had broken and there was nothing to hold it back now, no reason to stop it. Nothing remained that could take advantage of their vulnerability. Dazai was finally free, the torment had come to an end. They had so much ahead of them and one question circled in Chuuya’s mind.

“Yeah. We’re alive. Do we get out happy ever after together now?”

A choked laugh escaped Dazai, followed by a gulp as if to stop himself from crying as well. His shoulders shook slightly. Chuuya understood that Dazai finally realized what it meant that they were still there. Dazai nodded again, his voice barely above a whisper when he replied.

“We do. We’ve deserved it.”

Dazai’s lips found Chuuya’s in a kiss so sweet and tender, it sent shivers down his spine. It removed every lingering trace of anxiety and doubt in Chuuya’s head. Taste of blood and salt filled his mouth but quickly changed into the taste of Dazai which he would never get enough of. Not in a lifetime.

It was a promise. A promise for the future, whatever it may bring.

He chased the touch when Dazai broke the kiss. Dazai carried on with kissing the tears away, and Chuuya’s eyes fluttered shut, relishing the softness until Dazai placed another kiss on his lips. Chuuya was desperate to feel Dazai. And Dazai showed him everything he felt.

It was only when they broke apart that they noticed the absence of their abilities around them.

Yosano found them in the middle of ruins, deep down in the ground where one a basement had been, nothing above them but the darkness of the night.

She didn’t comment on anything, merely stretched a hand out to help them out of the detritus with a solemn upwards tilt of her lips.

“Come on, boys, let’s get away from here.”

Dazai took her hand first, then helped Chuuya up to his feet, who had to face the real degree of his injuries. Walking was hard, climbing even more. The strength he had felt until yet vanished from one second to the other and he tumbled as he tried to make a step. Yosano rushed to his assistance, looping his arm around her shoulder and allowing him to put most of his weight onto her. She banned Dazai from helping who did his best to hide a limp, making the promise to patch them up when they were with the others.

Over all, there weren’t many words needed, a silent serenity settling among them. The dark cloud that had hung over them, dissolved. Together they left the area, making their way to their hideout some blocks over, where everybody else would be awaiting them.

When they had put some distance between the place and them, Dazai turned around, making the other two stop and wait for him. Chuuya saw from behind how his knees trembled and he wished he could do anything to help Dazai. But there were things, and there would always be thoughts,
Chuuya couldn’t take off for him.

Dazai’s hands dug deeply into the pockets of his sweater. “I can’t believe it’s really over.” The words weren’t meant to address anyone, silent and spoken into nothingness. Reality was only slowly catching up on them.

Yet Yosano replied, “You can. There’s nothing to hold onto anymore, leave it in the past, Dazai.” She paused briefly. “We need to get you treated, there’s no reason to stay any longer.”

Chuuya agreed with her. All he wanted was to get away and leave that cursed place behind. He wanted to know the others were safe. Wanted to convince himself that they would make it. He wanted to believe that time for peace had come. He wanted to think about all the things that were yet to come – because whatever it was, it would be with Dazai by his side.

Dazai continued to follow them down the street, never looking back again. Neither did Chuuya.

They had never been invincible and they never would be – Life just wasn’t that generous. But they might have come close to something similar and whatever battle would follow next - they would take it on together.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Feel free to leave a kudo or a comment if you want.
Who got the reference in the last paragraph?
I still cannot comprehend that we have basically reached the end. Chapter 17 will be up next friday, as usual.
Social Media: Fenriel's Instagram
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Hello again!
Here it is, the final chapter. This has been a hell of a ride and I have no words to describe how much this fic means to me. It started out as an attempt of regaining my creativity and suddenly it became this insanely huge project which took me exactly 6 months and 10 days to finish. It has taught me so much about plotting, writing, and language and even if TWDP has its weakpoints here and there, I wouldn’t want to change it. The way it is now it tells not only the story of GhostHunter-Skk but also my writing journey.
So one last time: Have fun reading!

Note: changed rating to Mature

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dazai, have you seen my choker?” Chuuya had been searching for the last ten minutes but he couldn’t find it anywhere in the wardrobe. He had already gone through every drawer, even had a look into the bedside table but it was nowhere to be found. Slowly but surely Chuuya was stressing. Time was ticking and he didn’t want to be late.

“Second drawer from the bottom on the left side, somewhere between your ties!” came the answer from the living room and Chuuya opened said drawer. He pushed some strips of fabric around until he found the piece of leather in the very back. How had it gotten there? Well it didn’t matter as long as he could wear it now.

Grabbing a dress shirt, Chuuya slid into it while he walked out of the bedroom, back into the bathroom to blow dry his hair. As he passed the living room, he saw Dazai still lounging on the couch all casually, paying attention to something on his phone. Chuuya stopped in his track, brows furrowing in disapproval.

“Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

Dazai’s head shot up, lips pursed into an innocent pout. “Huh?” Acting as if he didn’t know what Chuuya expected from him.

He rolled his eyes. “We have to be out soon, why aren’t you ready yet?”

Dazai tilted his head to the side in apparent confusion. “You aren’t ready yet either. And we are not expected there for another one and a half hour. Why hurry?”

An exasperated sigh left Chuuya’s lips before he began buttoning up the white shirt. “Yes, the party starts at eight, but I want to be there earlier. If you get to know Kouyou, you shall at least get the chance to meet each other properly.”

He had been dreading that moment the entire day. To say he was nervous would be the understatement of the year; he was jittery from anxiety, although not finding a single reason why he should be. It’s not that he feared Kouyou wouldn’t like Dazai; on the contrary, he believed they
would get along very well. But additionally, Chuuya would meet all the people he hadn’t seen in months, and now he would show up with somebody by his side. He just couldn’t help the nervousness.

Dazai put his phone aside and got up to walk over to Chuuya, replacing Chuuya’s hands with his own as he continued buttoning up the shirt for him.

“And you couldn’t just tell me that?” A lopsided smile played on his lips as he closed the shirt, but not to the top so the choker would remain visible. He didn’t blame Chuuya for stressing, well knowing that it were only his nerves acting up. Nothing but affection gleamed in his eyes.

“I thought I did?” Chuuya really thought he had.

“No, you didn’t, I’ll change then.” Pulling Chuuya closer, Dazai placed a tender kiss on his lips, just long enough to draw a smile from Chuuya, then he let go and vanished into the bedroom.

Chuuya watched him go, watched how he pulled the sweater over his head as he walked and his gaze fell on his bare skin. Dazai had gained some weight over the last few weeks. Not much but enough so that he looked significantly healthier. Well, Chuuya had been cooking a lot – mostly crab but that was a mere coincidence, really.

The scars were still there, light against the skin, but Chuuya loved them. Not because he liked what they stood for, but because they were part of Dazai and part of his story that made him into the person he was today, the person Chuuya adored with his entire heart.

One thing had changed though; the inscriptions had faded the very same night they had defeated Erebus. The place they had taken up now bare, it reminded Chuuya every day of Dazai’s strength and what they had achieved.

Four weeks had passed and things had changed a lot since then but at the same time, they hadn’t.

There had never been a decision to make regarding where Dazai would go after. He had stayed with Chuuya and gradually the apartment had become their home. Admittedly, with Dazai there, his few belongings finding a place between Chuuya’s, one half of the wardrobe becoming his and his presence alone, the place felt more like a home to Chuuya than it ever had. It felt less empty, warmer – despite Dazai trying to put his cold hands on Chuuya’s bare stomach whenever he got the chance to.

They still hadn’t put a label on themselves. Chuuya just assumed they were dating, but they had never actually talked about that. Were they boyfriends? Lovers? Partners? He didn’t know. But he guessed the only thing that mattered was that they got to be together, in a time where they could look ahead to a bright future.

Lost in thoughts, Chuuya was still standing in the hallway when Dazai came out of the bedroom, clad in slacks and a button down, the suit draped over his now bandaged arm. Dazai had gotten used to not wearing them when at home; however, he still did in public out of habit. He fixed the golden watch around his wrist. A soft laugh had Chuuya snap out of his mind.

“Didn’t you want me to hurry? Yet you haven’t moved an inch.” Dazai smirked at him as he pulled the sleeve down to close the cuffs.

Realizing he had wasted quite some time, Chuuya turned on his heels and closed himself up in the bathroom to give his hair and make-up some finishing touches.

A few minutes later they were both fully dressed and ready to leave, if a little delayed.
“Ready?” Chuuya already had his hands on the door-handle when Dazai nodded, but he didn’t get to open it before Dazai suddenly straightened. “Wait, you’ve forgotten something!” then he rushed away, leaving Chuuya a baffled. What should he have forgotten? He had his wallet, the key, and the bottle of champagne for Kouyou. Checking his pockets again, he jumped when Dazai placed something atop his head – his hat.

“I think you should wear it. It suits you.”

Chuuya squinted, pushing the hat into place until it sat comfortably. “I believed you thought it was ‘hilarious?’”

Dazai shrugged, “I still do, but I never said it didn’t suit you.”

Shaking his head but unable to hide a smile, Chuuya just let it be, as long as Dazai was pleased. Sometimes he just didn’t get Dazai, whose grin didn’t cease.

“Let’s go.” Door halfway open, Chuuya was about to leave. His eyes fell on the black gloves that lay on the drawer next to the door.

A few months ago, he wouldn’t have gone anywhere without them. They had been glued to him and his worst days were the ones when he would forget them. Now the thought of wearing them didn’t even cross his mind. Somehow, he didn’t feel connected to them anymore. They symbolized the time before his life had taken a turn for the better. They represented the old him, the Chuuya that would get into trouble out of sheer boredom. He wasn’t that person anymore.

The door fell into the lock with the gloves remaining on the rack.

*_*_*_*

Despite his best efforts and some very questionable driving stunts, they arrived later than planned. A wave of warm air hit him upon entering and Chuuya wanted to turn on his heels when he saw how crowded the big hall already was. Only maybe a fourth of the invited guests had arrived there of which some had participated in organizing and decorating the location, but it were still too many who could possibly witness Dazai’s and Kouyou’s first encounter. At least for Chuuya’s liking. However, Dazai kept him from bolting, pulling him along into the room by their interlocked hands. He gripped him strong enough so Chuuya couldn’t withdraw. Reluctantly, Chuuya accepted his fate. There was no escape anyway. He guessed he should get it over with, better sooner than later.

Quick eyes scanned the ball room that Kouyou had rented for the night, for familiar faces. He saw Gin on top of a ladder, placing a Christmas bulb on the upper part of a huge tree. The secretary he had met when he had last paid the company a visit held the ladder so it wouldn’t fall over while Gin wobbled on the upper stair. Chuuya could only hope she wouldn’t fall down because this time, Yosano wouldn’t be able to heal a broken bone on the spot. Gin had been the only one who had been considerably injured after the fight, having had a concussion and a broken arm, both of which have been healed by Yosano immediately after they had escaped. Her brother came away with a few cuts and a strained ankle. Even Rashoumon had kept up strongly, although he had lost a leg in the fight that strangely never grew back, despite Yosano’s best efforts.
Speaking of the devil, the demonic dog was limping towards them when Chuuya spotted him. The sight drew a small smile from Chuuya. Glancing left and right, he made sure to pet him as long as nobody noticed. Only then Dazai allowed his hand to slip from his own.

“Thanks for leaving me off the leash,” Chuuya joked as he crouched down to ruffle Rashoumon’s not-fur.

Dazai watched Chuuya with a sly smirk and a humorous glint in his eyes. “Be careful what you say or I might put a leash on that fancy choker of yours.”

Chuuya gave him a light slap on the first part of Dazai he could reach – his legs, “You wouldn’t dare,” which was acknowledged with a wholehearted laugh. Never would he grow tired of that sound.

“You’re already here? Didn’t expect you so soon.” Akutagawa said. He and Atsushi approached them and Chuuya got up before anyone grew suspicious of what he was doing on the floor.

Dazai replied, “Chuuya said we were running late. Though you’re early too.”

“We came in with Gin, so we were obliged to be here for preparations.”

Atsushi looped his arm through Akutagawa’s as he explained and Chuuya believed to have never seen the young officer so relaxed ever before, nor his best friend seemingly so content, once not wearing a frown on his face.

The fight had taken a toll on all of them, undoubtedly. He knew how much Dazai had suffered the first days after, plagued by flashbacks in which he would be trapped until he would snap into reality completely shaken and a little disconnected. All Chuuya could do was to give him the comfort he asked for, even if seeing him that wrecked made Chuuya’s heart ache.

He himself had had nightmares for weeks from which he would wake up sweating and gasping for air. Dazai would always hold him and stroke his hair until he fell asleep again, a little more peacefully then before.

But they were managing, able to rely on each-other’s company and comfort. There were still bad moments in which they would get sucked into the darkness that had haunted them and apparently refused to leave their minds. But those were getting less and less with every day. Chuuya didn’t doubt that with time, they would recover enough to not have to fear a relapse every day. They had each other’s support.

He knew Atsushi had been fairly jumpy and seen danger behind every corner, that’s what Akutagawa had told him at least. While claiming to not have any aftereffect himself, Chuuya secretly suspected that Akutagawa was in denial. He hoped he would talk to either him or Atsushi when he felt ready.

Sneaking up to them fairly unsuccessfully with those clicking heels, carrying a glass champagne in her left hand, Yosano joined them, followed by Ranpo who nibbled on some sweets. “You look good, boys.”

“You look good, boys.”

“Thanks, you do too.” Chuuya felt some of the tension seep from his shoulders, being surrounded by the people that have grown to be his closest friends in the last few weeks. Who would have thought that the pickpocket Chuuya, who got in trouble with the police more often than he could count, would count the people he once enjoyed to annoy to his friends now?

He knew Kunikida would come at some point later today as well, but Chuuya didn’t really mind
anymore. They had still to become friends, but the last time at the bar they had shared some good laughs. They were warming up to each other and Chuuya believed their relationship would improve over time, as long as he wouldn’t get arrested again.

The group continued with some small talk, but Chuuya didn’t actually pay attention to them. He was looking for a familiar red-head that he ought to find before the place would get too crowded. He spotted her wearing a stunning dark blue dress, talking to Hirotsu near the stage where the band was setting up their instruments.

Tugging at Dazai’s hand slightly, he gained his attention.

“Dazai, we still have something to get over with.”

Dazai cocked an eyebrow, following Chuuya’s gaze and then he let out a soft laugh. How did it come that he didn’t seem nervous in the slightest? Maybe because Dazai wasn’t. Chuuya envied him for that calmness. He was nervous enough for both of them.

“Right, come on then. I am excited!” Sounding ever so cheerful as he excused them, it earned them some teasing looks.

“Have fun guys!” Yosano yelled as they trailed off, “and keep it PG!”

Heat crept up Chuuya’s neck, sure that the entire room must have heard. Hadn’t he known better, he would have suspected her to be drunk already.

Collecting some courage, Chuuya went ahead, Dazai following one step behind. His heart beat a little too fast for his liking and he hated the anxious tightness in his chest. He knew he probably had no need to be nervous, but if he could stop it, he would in an instant.

Kouyou didn’t notice them approaching and only turned around when Chuuya cleared his throat behind her. She swirled around in surprise, then she embraced him in a delighted hug, her heavy perfume filling Chuuya’s nose.

“You came! I didn’t believe you’d do. I was waiting for your call with one of your scrawny excuses.”

Chuuya scoffed, a bit offended even though that sounded like something he would do.

“Oh so kind as ever. I promised I’d come, so here I am.” He let go of her when he heard a subtle chuckle next to them. Dazai was covering his laugh behind a hand.

“Although I don’t know if he’d be here hadn’t I talked to his bad conscience the last few days.”

Confident as ever, Dazai extended a hand to Kouyou and Chuuya didn’t miss how her brows furrowed a little as she scrutinized Dazai from head to toe. “Dazai Osamu, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

For a brief moment, which felt like half an eternity to Chuuya, Kouyou did nothing. Had Dazai already failed her test? That couldn’t be, he barely had done anything yet. But if Kouyou found something she didn’t like, he already might be out of favor. He gnawed on his lower lip nervously.

Then her stern expression broke into a welcoming smile. “God that sound so much like him. Kouyou Ozaki, I’ve heard so much about you!” and an audible sigh passed Chuuya’s lips.

Dazai offered her a wink, charming as ever, “Only the best I guess.”
Kouyou nodded, “I don’t think he could ever say anything bad about you, he talks about you as if you are his sun, moon and stars.” Chuuya’s cheeks reddened anew, but for another reason this time. She might be right, but hearing it sounded dumb to his own ears.

He let out a whine, hoping to cut off the conversation here, but of course that didn’t work.

Instead, Dazai chuckled again, looping his arm around Chuuya’s waist and pulling him close before his voice turned tender. “I hope he does, because he’s my world.”

The words flustered Chuuya. He had expected a mocking reply, but not straightforward affection. Dazai rarely talked about his feelings towards Chuuya but rather let actions speak. Hearing something like that from him – Chuuya scrambled for words but they were stolen from him when Dazai placed a chase kiss on his lips.

A little dumbstruck, he accepted Kouyou’s ‘awww’ without comment, not daring to meet her eyes anymore. He felt as if he was burning up from inside.

“I am glad to hear.” Kouyou truly was happy for them, Chuuya knew.

A voice called her name. “Oh, I guess, I am needed, I’ll be back in a second, see you!” She excused herself and already rushed away, but then turned around a last time with a sheepish grin. “Oh, and don’t get too drunk Chuuya! You know what happens.”

His head dropping in frustration, Chuuya groaned. “It’s been years, Kouyou, years!”

“Well, actually-,” Dazai started, nudging Chuuya slightly, who immediately cut him off with a sharp “Shut up”, but Kouyou had heard anyway, now laughing directly at him. “Take care of him, Dazai, I trust you on that.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

Chuuya wished the ground would open up and swallow him. He hadn’t been that embarrassed in a long time.

Dazai was still laughing. “I think it went well.”

“Too well,” Chuuya grumbled. He had the unsettling feeling that Kouyou and Dazai would make it a habit to ally against him. “I need a drink.”

“Didn’t she just say that you shouldn’t –“

“Wine. Now.”

Dazai had no other choice but to follow to the bar, where Chuuya got his desired drink and Dazai a glass of whiskey.

By now the official opening time had neared and it showed. Along with the rising number of guests that came in, the volume had increased as well. People were talking to each other but Chuuya didn’t actually care about them. He was just glad that he had survived the worst part of the evening surprisingly well.

The drink ran down his throat like honey and he savored the taste. Exactly what he needed right now.

“Chuuya, is that you?”
Oh god, he had known the moment would come but he had hoped for at least some more minutes of being unrecognized that he got to spend with Dazai, but there went that. At least he didn’t have to fake the friendliness because the voice belonged to a person he had really enjoyed talking to once.

“Yeah, it’s me. Surprise?”

Tachihara already carried a drink of his own and seemed honestly happy to see Chuuya again. Chuuya did feel a little bad. He remembered the last time they had spoken to each other and while he had thought of his words as nonsense back then, he now understood what Tachihara had meant. Just because somebody disappeared for some time didn’t mean people forgot about them, even though Chuuya believed that back then. But they hadn’t forgotten him.

“I’d recognize that hat anywhere,” Tachihara joked, taking a sip. “What brings us the honor?”

“A promise I needed to keep.” He really had avoided those get-togethers for too long. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that Kouyou had him promise that time.

Nodding approvingly, the man asked, “How are you doing? You don’t think of starting in the company now, right? Just asking, because I know about the meeting you had with Fitzgerald. Some rumors were making the round.”

“No, I’m still not going to associate with the company. It’s just not my world,” Alone the thought of getting an office job sent repelled shivers down his spine, though he had planned on staying a little more up to date with the company’s business. Dinner made him realize how useful such knowledge might become in the most unexpected situations, and who knew when would come in handy again?

“I see… still troubling the police?” Tachihara’s tone didn’t carry any malice, just serious curiosity and Chuuya couldn’t do anything against his smile widening as memories of those times flashed up.

“No, actually not. I think I can confidently say to have left that behind me.”

“What are you doing then?”

Shifting a little where he stood, Chuuya took a moment to word it properly.

“Let’s say we help people who don’t have anyone else to turn to.”

Chuuya didn’t actively notice how he stepped a little closer to Dazai and well into his personal space as he said ‘we’, but Tachihara did, his gaze falling onto Chuuya’s partner.

Taking the hint, Dazai, who had been considerably silent the entire conversation, quickly introduced himself like the gentleman he was sometimes and suddenly Tachihara’s eyebrows shot up. “I’ve heard about you! I’ve heard Fitzgerald mentioning your name, he was talking fairly highly about you. You are Chuuya’s business p-“

“Boyfriend.”

Chuuya almost choked on his drink, coughing silently when he collected himself and put the glass aside.

All that time they just had taken their relationship as it went, putting a label on it took it to another whole level. Especially when it happened so out of sudden.
Tachihara didn’t catch on Chuuya’s slip, too astonished by what Dazai had said.

“Oh”, it was said quietly but the fact had obviously thrown him off, having not expected it.

Dazai’s smile didn’t cease. “But yes, we are partners as well. We work together, just not in the business of the company. Usually we’d be off to work now, but for this special event we’ve taken the night off.” He continued as if he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary and Chuuya was bound to go along with it. The word ‘boyfriend’, however, kept replaying in his head. Pleasant warmth settled in his chest. He found himself to like that.

But Dazai was right. They had taken another week off after the battle to recover the best they could until they decided to take up ghost-hunting again. It had been a real effort to make up for all the ignored calls and catching up with the cases that had come up during the time they had brushed their job aside. They had taken care of up to four cases a day and today was their first real day off since then. Chuuya only hoped it would get calmer now, the number of work decreasing a little, so chances were high. Over all, he did in fact enjoy the return of a regular routine. It gave him some sense of security.

“I see,” Tachihara still seemed at a loss for words when Chuuya sneakily intertwined his fingers with Dazai’s, and he could feel a kind of awkward silence settle. Not because Tachihara seemed uncomfortable, but rather astonished.

To their luck, Gin came to save them, appearing out of nowhere and jumping onto Tachihara’s back with a squeal. The man barely managed to hold his balance as he tried to not fall over and hold Gin on his back.

Exchanging glances, Dazai and Chuuya shared a thought, because Tachihara didn’t seem super surprised by her attack. He groaned when he straightened up.

“You can be glad I haven’t fallen,” he scolded and Gin merely giggled.

“You never have before,” she said as she draped her arms around his shoulders and ultimately confirming their suspicion. It made Chuuya more than happy to know that Gin had settled in well in PREP, having found a place where she felt comfortable and made new friends. Offering her the job had been one of his better decisions, and from what Kouyou had told him, she really made a great addition in their team.

“One day, I will. And that won’t be so much fun anymore.” Tachihara said, and Gin pouted.

“Killjoys. I am hunrgy, can you carry me to the buffet?”

“Can’t you walk?”

“No.”

Tachihara sighed, then apologized to Dazai and Chuuya. “I guess I have to fulfill sweetheart’s wishes, see you around.”

Amused by Gin’s blush, Chuuya waved them good-bye before they went off. If Akutagawa knew what was building up there… he needed to make sure that Tachihara got warned beforehand.

His thoughts returned to a more pressing matter. He turned so that he could face Dazai properly, leaning his head back to look him in the eyes.

“So… boyfriend?”
His gaze flicked down to where Dazai sucked in his lower lip briefly and if for a second he saw some insecurity flash over Dazai’s expression. He might be good at hiding it, but Chuuya knew him well enough to notice anyway.

And then the unbelievable happened. Dazai stuttered.

“I- uh- I just thought we’ve been – you know –.” It was honestly endearing, how frightened of having pushed Chuuya he was.

The hand Chuuya placed on his cheek shut him up.

“Don’t worry. It’s fine. Great actually. I like that.” Excitement built up in his stomach. One more step that reinforced their future together – not that Chuuya had had any doubts prior, but speaking out the words put wholeheartedness to it. “I’d love to call you my boyfriend.”

Highlighting what he just had said, Chuuya pulled Dazai down and into a kiss that eased every tension that had him on the edge the entire night up to now. They both melted into the touch, Dazai’s hands found grip on Chuuya’s waist and pulled him even closer, pressed him into his body. Chuuya complied willingly. It was a kiss admitting to commitment and Chuuya would never get enough of kissing his boyfriend.

Cheers from beside them startled them. At some point all their friends had gathered around them and started rooting for them vocally. A bit embarrassed, Chuuya intended to draw back, but Dazai kept him close with one hand, while the other snatched his head and put it in front of their faces, where it acted as a privacy shield.

It made Chuuya smile into the kiss. The people around them broke out in laughter until they finally broke apart.

People clapped, their friend hollered and Chuuya wanted nothing more than to disappear behind his head again. That night would sure continue to be an interesting one. Nonetheless, he put it onto his head again bravely, embracing the unwanted attention. Chuuya must have been bright red, because the group laughed even more when they saw his face. Kouyou was amongst them, to Chuuya’s delight, next to Kunikida who must have joined recently. Even he was clapping, nothing but honest joy for them in his expression.

His life had taken a drastic turn ever since he had met Dazai, but only for the better. Never would have Chuuya pictured himself amongst such a great group of people on who he could count anytime and who he could trust with his life. They had proven that, literally.

And never would he have believed to find the person that made his complemented his heat in Dazai, the person that was responsible for his view of the world to make total turn.

From ready to throw him off a building after their first encounter to getting sucked into deepest corners of this world by him to never wanting to see him leave again – what a change. One that Chuuya hadn’t regretted a second.

Music started playing, the band finally ready, and the group scattered around Dazai and Chuuya cheerfully, embracing the rhythm and leaving no space for escape. Even Akutagawa, who Chuuya had never seen as much as wiggle a finger, got convinced by Atsushi. They were all forced to dance along.

Dazai offered him a hand, that affectionate expression on his face that Chuuya had grown familiar with but which made his heart melt every single time. Chuuya accepted the hand and the next
moment he was swirled around to the music.

Chuuya couldn’t remember a night when he had laughed that much, but so far he enjoyed every second of it. That’s where he wanted to be – amongst his friends and Dazai.

Dazai – the person he may have fallen in love with.

Chapter End Notes

That’s it. The boys have made it and we’ve made it till the end. I hope you are pleased with how it turned out :)

Huge thank-yous to my friends R and N who have helped me out with mistakes at any time. My wholehearted appreciation goes out to I, who has stayed by my side through the entire project and has taken hours of her days to read the newest updates and listened to all my headcanons and plot ideas. You pushed me through <3

But my biggest gratitude is for my readers, for all those who have read and stayed, have cheered and cried with the boys. <3 To those who took the time to write comments or left a kudo or even just came back every week. Please know that your support is what had me continue and it always brightened my days! Seeing your support had me smile every time, I couldn’t be more greatful!

And what now? Well, my mind doesn't rest and is already working on another fic, which should air sometime in spring (hopefully April). Other than that, I will be back with occasional OneShots, maybe even for this AU. Maybe I’ll see you around! Thanks for everything <3

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