Firefly

Dazai’s mission is to bring Chuuya into the Port Mafia. As they work together on their first mission, Dazai sees the light for the first time, radiating like a burning fire from Chuuya. Drawn to his light and blinded by the hope that Chuuya awakened within him, Dazai decides to embark on the riskiest plan he had ever come up with. He cannot and will not let Chuuya’s fire be corrupted by the Port Mafia. However, now that he has glimpsed the light, he is not sure that he can return to the darkness either…

In which Soukoku join the Armed Detective Agency instead of the Port Mafia aged fifteen.
Chapter Notes

Hi! Thank you for joining us on this journey. :)  
Just a quick note before we begin. For the most part, I will not rewrite the events written in Fifteen, because that would just be boring. Instead, this story will mention the events of Fifteen while filling in the gaps (e.g. what happened between Soukoku making the deal at the arcade and their talk to Randou) before moving on to the main story with them in the ADA. I want to build their relationship in a canonically plausible way rather than just jump into it, hence why the beginning of this will be set during Fifteen. If you want to skip most of the buildup from Fifteen (though I would not recommend that), go to chapter 4.  
Updates are every 6-14 days.  
Without further ado, enjoy!

The warm ember sky of twilight generated a rusty glow that seeped over the spacious office belonging to the boss of the Port Mafia. Inside the ornate regal suite, three figures could be pinpointed. At the head of the table was the boss of the Port Mafia himself, a young blonde girl colouring on the ground to his left with several types of cakes next to her.

Parallel to him sat a brown-haired boy with bandages concealing most of his body. He watched the boss with a look that was sharp and faraway, as if his mind was both on edge and elsewhere at the same time. ‘Why did you want me to stay, Mori?’ Dazai had already finished his report for the day. Yesterday, he wrapped up the search for the old boss right before Chuuya appeared. Today, he did almost nothing since he had to wait for Chuuya to wake up after being knocked out, and when Chuuya did wake up, Mori simply told them to work together and let Chuuya go. Mori knew all about it, so there had to be some reason why he was not allowed to go home yet.

Mori put his elbows on the table and supported his chin with his hands. ‘You should know why you’re still here, Dazai.’

‘Does it concern a walking headache that I now have to handle for every second of my life until the mission is over, by any chance?’ Dazai spat with unrestrained venom in his voice. After Chuuya agreed to help the investigation into the appearance of the old boss and Arahabaki, Mori decreed that they were to be together at all times for the duration of the investigation unless Dazai needed to see Mori or undertake any mafia business that Chuuya should not be told about. Neither Dazai nor Chuuya was pleased about it, which they had made evident by arguing against that decision, but Mori did not budge and his word was absolute. Right now, they were only apart because Dazai had been asked to stay in Mori’s office a bit longer, leaving Hirotsu to take Chuuya to Dazai’s flat.

‘I see my training has served you well,’ Mori replied with a pleased smile that did not quite reach his eyes. Upon hearing that line, Dazai suppressed the uneasiness he felt pooling down to his stomach with a light confident chuckle, making sure he did not let a hint of a crack appear on his flawless mask of calmness and listlessness. He could not show Mori any hint of weakness, nor could he falter in front of him. Not unless he wanted more training, which he did not.
Mori continued, his gaze fixed on Dazai. ‘As you’ve most likely figured out by now, there’s another reason why I asked you to work with Chuuya. Chuuya is a gifted ability user with a lot of potential. That kind of potential could pose a real threat for the organisation in the future. We can’t let him remain in the wrong hands any longer, especially not when we have such a golden opportunity on our doorstep.’

‘I understand,’ Dazai responded in his standard emotionless manner. ‘So, what you want me to do is to create discord between Chuuya and the Sheep in order to push the Sheep to expel him as a traitor.’

‘I knew you would get it! Just as expected of my student.’ Dazai prevented a grimace from showing up on his face. This was not the time to scowl at Mori, no matter how much he wanted to. ‘You have free reign over Chuuya and the situation. Do as you like. I don’t care what means you employ as long as you fulfil your mission.’

Mori’s choice to pair Chuuya and Dazai was deliberate. The two were like oil and water, which was exactly what made them perfect for each other. They could make up for each other’s weak points and their immediate hatred of each other could only serve to blossom into a most fruitful rivalry that could help the Port Mafia flourish. Dazai was smart enough to play Chuuya and Chuuya was naïve enough to be played, so Mori knew that Dazai would succeed in his mission. Besides, if he saw that there was someone else around his age in the mafia, Chuuya, who had only spent time with kids his age and younger before, would not feel like the mafia was not the place for him. Mori’s plan was for Dazai to follow into his footsteps as the next boss of the Port Mafia with Chuuya as his second-in-command, but to bring that goal within reach, Chuuya had to join the mafia first.

‘Ah, this is so troublesome… For my first job, I have to work without any direction whatsoever while sneaking behind my partner’s back. That’s cruel, Mori. Will I have access to any information I need, at least? Earlier, you sent me to Suribachi with barely anything to go by,’ Dazai complained, akin to a grumpy kid who did not get his favourite ice cream flavour for lunch. Before meeting Chuuya, he was not informed of his secondary objective, having only been given a quick summary of the Sheep and their King. It had been a hasty ride to Suribachi as reports that Chuuya had been sighted heading towards the area of interest emerged. Unlike Chuuya thought, their meeting had not been a coincidence. The real reason why Dazai and Hirotsu were sent to where the previous boss appeared at that time and not earlier or later was to capture Chuuya’s attention and make contact. When Dazai bumped into Chuuya, he realised that the moment the mafia heard Chuuya was around, he and Hirotsu set off for Suribachi immediately, leaving Dazai with no time for a proper briefing. Either that or their location was leaked to Chuuya so he could approach them, which was less likely since there was no guarantee it would be Chuuya of all people who showed up to meet up with them.

‘Of course, all of the information we have on Chuuya and the Sheep is available to you. You will be kept up to date with any recent developments. I’m also putting a guerrilla squad under your command.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I’ll do my best, boss,’ the sulky teenager replied with a sigh, sounding like he was done with life (which he was – oh, how he wished the sweet embrace of death would just come take him). Trust Mori to put him on a difficult mission with a guy he hated for his first official Port Mafia mission. ‘Is that all?’

‘Yes. You’re free to go.’ Had Dazai believed in God, he would have thanked the Lord that he could finally leave the room. He could deal with Mori, but that did not make any meeting with him any more enjoyable. The literal headache he would get from having to speed read all the documents
they had on the Sheep and his new angry slug of a partner before he went back to his flat could already be felt protruding through his temples.

‘Bye,’ Dazai said as he got up and started to walk towards the door. He was going through possible scenarios he could create to instil doubt and distrust into Chuuya and the Sheep about each other. He could see the end goal clearly, but not the middle bits that led to his preferred conclusion. Even though he had a few ideas, he needed to double-check that the information they had was in line with his assumptions and would provide appropriate circumstances for the misunderstandings he planned to happen. That was Mori’s second reason for keeping Dazai in his office and having Hirotsu take Chuuya away: to give Dazai time to look over documents about Chuuya and the Sheep without seeming suspicious and without letting Chuuya go free.

‘I trust that you will know what to do to complete your mission when the moment comes, Dazai.’

The icy, calculated graveness in the doctor’s sombre tone stopped Dazai in his tracks. It was the tone he used when he wanted to make it clear that failure would not be tolerated. ‘Of course, Mori,’ Dazai turned around with a dark look in his empty eyes, mirroring Mori’s tone with a sly smirk.

With that, Dazai left Mori’s office. He had suspected that Chuuya was Mori’s real target due to how convenient their meeting had been. It was not like Mori to care about a small gang made up of some random delinquent kids with no ambition of expanding their territory (or of doing anything that was not staying alive and on the defensive), even if said kids had been stealing bits and pieces from the mafia, so his intention had to be something much more important, like securing a powerful ability user before he became a threat to them. Yes, he did need to manage the whole ordeal with the previous boss appearing, but there was no point in passing up on this chance to hit two birds with one stone. Based on Mori’s personality, he most likely knew what was going on anyway (perhaps he even caused it) and was merely testing Dazai, the ultimate aim of the joint investigation being to recruit Chuuya.

If Chuuya remained in the Sheep, they would use his power to overstep their boundaries even further, and with Chuuya’s power, they could attract more members and grow as an organisation until they became an urgent concern. The best way to counter a strong opponent is to either destroy them before they overpower you or bring them to your side before they reach their full power. It was a preemptive war that aimed to take control of the enemies’ strongest piece, a strategy meant to both cripple the enemy and strengthen the mafia’s position.

And Dazai would see it through. It took him all of five seconds to decide that he hated everything about Chuuya, from his ridiculous strength to his inane arrogance. Honest, uncomplicated kids like Chuuya were easy to manipulate and take advantage of. A manipulative schemer like Dazai was the best type of person to exploit Chuuya’s personality, feelings and relationships, as well as to create opportunities to instigate friction between Chuuya and the Sheep. That was what he had been trained for, after all. The year he had spent learning from Mori and the horrible years before that had ingrained the art of manipulation and planning ten steps ahead into him. Tricking a dense overconfident midget and bringing him to the mafia on a silver platter was going to be a piece of cake.

Yet, Dazai could not deny that he would not mind having Chuuya in the mafia. As much as he disliked him as a person, his ability and fierce loyalty would be an asset to the organisation. That was all there was to it. He definitely did not wish to have him around otherwise.
‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ Chuuya shouted, grabbing Dazai by his tie. His expression showcased his murderous intent unabashedly as if it was an expensive porcelain doll in a luxury department store.

‘Mori’s orders,’ Dazai replied with resignation. ‘We can’t let you out of sight, so this is the compromise we have reached.’

Unfortunately, Mori meant it when he said he wanted to keep an eye on Chuuya for every single second while he was cooperating with the mafia. They could not risk giving Chuuya time alone in which he could contact the Sheep or jeopardise their joint mission. That is what led to the decision that Dazai or a trustworthy Port Mafia member should be with him at all times, including when he was asleep, which is why Chuuya was now in Dazai’s bedroom, looking at the offensive, personal space-neglecting prison that was Dazai’s fluffy white double bed.

‘I’m not thrilled about having to share a bed with an annoying shrimp either! I would much rather share it with a pretty lady, but alas, I’m stuck with you. Can’t you see I’m the victim here?’

In an instant, the air in the room grew heavy with tension, freezing over like the ninth circle of Hell. Chuuya shoved Dazai into the nearest wall harshly, cracks appearing on impact. ‘You’re the victim? I’m being forced to work with an organisation whom I hate and who has taken my friends hostage, and you think you’re the victim?’ Rage and pain combined in his shaky voice, his eyes resembling liquid fire as they bore into Dazai’s hollow ones with a suffocating intensity that threatened to wreak havoc and leave nothing but destruction and ruin behind. Chuuya’s feelings were written all over his face, from his furrowed eyebrows to his frown, not to mention his abnormally tight grip on Dazai. His gaze alone would have inspired fear and intimidated most people into submission. However, Dazai was not like most people; he was a shell devoid of emotions, a being disqualified from being human.

So why was it that despite his supposed emptiness, he wanted to soothe the unadulterated feelings of worry and sorrow in the other boy’s heart?

The teeniest consideration of assuring Chuuya that everything was going to be fine passed through Dazai’s mind for the most ephemeral of seconds. He could not identify the unfamiliar factor that prompted that subconscious thought, nor could he come up with a reason why he would regard reassuring Chuuya as mandatory. Logic ruled his brain and no unnecessary courses of action ever surfaced, not even as passing ideas. Perhaps it was a by-effect of figuring out the real situation and what was coming?

He knew exactly where the captives were held and could get them out within seconds with just a phone call. He knew it was not in Mori’s best interest to kill them since he needed them to blackmail Chuuya into doing the mafia’s work and as a reminder for Chuuya that he was not welcome in the Sheep anymore after his impending ‘betrayal’. He knew how this entire case would end, with Chuuya joining the mafia and leaving his friends behind, but alive. Mori had planned it so, and to be fair, Dazai did not even have to do much to complete his part of the mission. It would be so easy to just tell Chuuya the truth, albeit ensuring his mission succeeded subsequently would be difficult. For the sake of the mission, he had to keep his mouth shut. Telling Chuuya of his friends’ outcome was out of the question. Nevertheless, he could at least hint at it without messing up if he did it right.

Having been met with extended silence, Chuuya released his hold on him with a displeased humph and turned around, averting his eyes and crossing his arms. Not wanting to be a metre closer to the suicidal maniac than obligatory, he put some distance between them by walking from the doorway where they had been standing to the bed.
Dazai snapped back to reality. He had no idea what came over him. What was he thinking?
Notifying Chuuya that Mori had no intention to kill the Sheep might help him cooperate for the
duration of the mission, given that Chuuya’s goal was to learn about Arahabaki, but with the
knowledge that Mori wanted to keep his friends alive, even an idiot could work out that the future
threat to kill his friends to force him into joining the mafia was just a mere bluff. Dazai was not
aware of how everything would play out at that moment, though his information indicated that in
the end, he was going to make Chuuya choose the impossible: his friends’ lives or his loyalty to the
Sheep. Behind his tough guy act, Chuuya seemed like more of a sentimental fool than he would
have liked to admit, so of course he would choose to save his friends and join the mafia. It was a
no-brainer. Besides, if Dazai’s part of the mission went according to the plan, the Sheep would
kick him out of the organisation anyway, so it was not as if Chuuya would be left with any other
option. All of the bases will have been covered by that fateful moment. For now, they just had to
wait until the next day.

He looked back at Chuuya, who was still up on his feet near the bed, clearly not knowing how to
get out of this awkward situation. There was much more to his stillness than that, though. As much
as Chuuya tried to hide it, Dazai could see the hurt in his downward glance and self-protective
posture. He really was bad at lying and hiding his feelings, the complete opposite of Dazai. Even
so, for someone whose friends were in a dire situation and who was clearly perturbed by that fact,
he was doing an impressive job at holding up and trying to do everything he could to save them.

‘Can’t I just sleep on the floor?’ Chuuya asked while turning to face Dazai with an expectant look.
The simple-minded dumbass was under the impression that he managed to get out of sharing the
bed. If it was that easy, Dazai would have thought of that by now.

‘How do I know that while I was out, you didn’t hide a communicator, a knife or something you
can use to compromise the mission and betray the Port Mafia somewhere you can reach from the
floor, but not from the bed?’ Dazai asked with a raised brow. While he doubted Chuuya was
cunning enough to do something like that, he knew Mori probably put cameras in his room and
would chew him out for it if he did not follow through with the plan like this. No matter how much
he hated the idea of sharing a bed with a guy he disliked, he could not take any risks.

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Chuuya responded, feeling insulted by the accusation. He may not have been
part of the mafia, but he was a man of his word and loyal to a fault. If he promised he would
cooperate, he would do it all the way to the end. ‘I did no such thing while you were out. Or
anything else, for that matter. I didn’t even enter the bedroom since the old man was keeping me
under watch in the living room all along. Ask your fellow mafioso if you don’t believe me.’

‘Your lack of intelligence is so outstanding that I believe you.’

Chuuya let the insult slide to focus on the issue at hand. ‘Then what’s the point of sleeping in the
same bed?’

‘Didn’t I tell you already? Mori’s orders. Allow me to explain it for your inferior brain: if he says
we have to stay together even when you’re asleep and the only way for that is to share a bed, then
we do so, no questions asked, no objections. God, I can’t believe Mori would put me through
something as horrible as this. Just seeing you makes me sick, let alone having to sleep next to you.’

‘Right back at you, douchebag. I’d rather take a knife to the gut than share the bed.’

‘Oh, don’t tell me you haven’t had to share a bed before?’ Dazai asked with his exasperating
teasing tone. ‘I know your organisation isn’t exactly the richest. Is the mighty King of Sheep too
good to have ever shared a bed like plenty of other members of the organisation have probably
done?’
‘Don’t you fucking dare bring them into this,’ Chuuya snarled with a dangerous glint in his eyes. ‘I was referring to sharing the bed with you tonight, idiot.’ He thought that was obvious enough. It seemed unrealistic that anyone would think of never having had to share a bed before first and foremost; how Dazai misinterpreted his words the way he did and why he even cared was a mystery. Unless… ‘It’s you who’s never had to share a bed, isn’t it? You’re nervous and projecting your own discomfort onto me.’ The only type of person who would think of having never had to share a bed previously and not react with surprise at that thought was someone who had never had to do that, he reasoned. ‘Chill the fuck down, it’s just sleeping in the vicinity of another person. Kids and teens our age do it all the time, it’s no big deal.’

Truth to be told, Chuuya was not wrong. The only times Dazai had ever had to share a bed were… less than pleasant, and he had never had to do so for an entire night. Informing Chuuya of that would have been pointless, though.

‘You’re right, it’s no big deal. So why don’t you just put up with it and stop complaining? My ears are starting to hurt from having to hear your irritating voice for more than a millisecond.’ Bingo, now he had Chuuya where he wanted him. He had no more grounds to refuse now, just as Mori wished.

‘Says the guy who sounds like a whiny, petulant, overgrown child,’ Chuuya retorted.

‘You’re just jealous of my buttery smooth voice that makes the ladies swoon! I bet you’ve never even had a girlfriend,’ Dazai mocked, his left hand flailing dismissively at Chuuya.

‘Bitch, you’re the one who’d be jealous of my voice if you heard me sing,’ Chuuya sent him a smile full of aplomb. He was so triggered by that comment that he completely ignored the girlfriend part. He was a good singer and quite proud of that, thank you very much.

‘Oh, really?’ Dazai asked with his best attempt at keeping his intonation devoid of anything except for derision. ‘Why don’t you give it a go, then? I suggest you sing Beep Beep I’m a Sheep.’

‘Fuck you!’ Chuuya grabbed the closest pillow and threw it at Dazai’s face.

‘No, thank you,’ he uttered while dodging the pillow. ‘I know I’m irresistible, but I don’t like boys. Keep your hands to yourself tonight, alright?’

‘As if I have such poor taste as to consider you anything other than a waste of bandages and suicidal freak,’ Chuuya countered quickly, his tone an octave higher than normal due to embarrassment. For God’s sake, he was not that type of guy! Not that his temporary companion had any way of knowing that.

Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in Chuuya’s head. He smirked, narrowing his eyes and looking straight into Dazai’s with mischief. ‘So that’s what’s bothering you, eh? Fortunately for you, I’ve survived many sleepovers without anything inappropriate happening. In fact, it’s you who should keep your hands off. I wouldn’t be surprised if a nuisance like you turned out to be a sleazy pervert.’

That insinuation unsettled Dazai and got on his nerves. While he may not have had a conscience and he could not feel things like guilt, that is where he drew the line. Dazai treated girls well and would never do such a thing against someone’s will. He was not like some other people in the mafia in that aspect. ‘I’ll let you know I’m actually a gentleman.’

‘Yeah, you need to, otherwise you’d stand no chance. Not with that shitty personality of yours.’
Dazai rolled his eyes in exasperation. ‘Ah, yes, you totally get a say in that, because anger issues and stunted growth are such appealing features.’

‘I’m still growing, you dipshit!’ Another pillow flew his way to no avail.

‘The fact that you take offence to that part in particular says a lot about your insecurity.’

Chuuya groaned, stifling a frustrated scream. He was so fucking done. He had had a mentally exhausting day and the piece of shit in human skin standing in front of him was not making things any easier. ‘Look, can we just go the fuck to sleep already? I want to end this as soon as possible so I don’t have to see your stupid face ever again.’

‘That’s my line.’ Dazai stuck his tongue out at Chuuya like the very mature, absolutely not moody teenager he was. ‘There are changes of clothes for you in the closet.’ Before Chuuya came into the bedroom and discovered their little predicament, he had placed the bag of clothes that he bought on the way back in the closet. ‘You’re so small that I had to go out of my way to buy clothes for you since my clothes would have just hung over you like you’re a badly made clothes hanger.’

Considering that the person who chose the clothes was a jerkass who deemed bandages a perfectly valid fashion statement, Chuuya could practically picture what an odious monstrosity his new clothes were going to be. Even so, that small gesture of thoughtfulness made him feel both happy and bad at once. He would not have minded picking up some of his own clothes from his house while under mafia supervision, though he did not want the mafia anywhere near the Sheep’s headquarters either. Upon reminding himself that he was basically forced to do the Port Mafia’s bidding with his friends as hostages and that the mafia would not hesitate to annihilate the Sheep if he did not comply, the mild guilt dissipated. The least the mafia could do while he was shackled to them was provide him with decent conditions, after all, and right now, they were not acing that, if the bed situation was anything to judge from. ‘You didn’t have to.’

‘Exactly. That’s why you should thank me, brat.’

Chuuya’s momentary guilt faded away in an instant when Dazai opened his mouth. ‘Go fuck yourself. Or die, whatever floats your boat.’

‘You’re so ungrateful!’ Dazai had actually made an effort to pick something that he believed fit Chuuya’s style overall. Sure, he mostly went clothes-shopping to explain his prolonged absence (he was totally not reading everything available on Chuuya and the Sheep in the Port Mafia’s library for most of the time he was absent), but he still tried to do what he could with the limited time he had for shopping.

‘And you’re an arsehole of the highest calibre. Were you any more of a prick, you’d be piercing through the fabric of the universe itself.’

‘At least I have a brain and people don’t need a magnifying glass to see me.’

‘Are you finished? I want to go to sleep and I can’t do that if you keep yapping at me.’ Chuuya had begun rummaging through the closet, realising that giving Dazai his full attention any longer would only serve to piss him off further.

Dazai took a deep sigh. This was going to be a long mission. Those few days that they would spend on the mission were going to feel like a long, unrelenting eternity. He was brought back from his musings on the suffering on his horizon by an animalistic growl of disgust coming from the direction of the closet.
'Is this a joke?' Chuuya asked rhetorically as he took out a cute fluffy orangish brown dog onesie from the clothes bag. It seemed to be the only pyjama in the bag.

'I thought it suited you.' Dazai put on a cheerful closed eyes smile. He appeared oddly proud of himself.

'What the fuck do you mean by that?!!' Chuuya screamed at him, ready to use the dog onesie to smother him to death.

'You’re tiny, loyal and desperate for a pat on the back from your master,' Dazai declared, sounding amused. He was certainly enjoying this a bit too much.

What the actual fuck? Was his temporary roommate on drugs or did he legitimately speak in riddles like that all the time? Either way, Chuuya was having none of it. If there was any doubt that he was sick of dealing with this shit before, it all went away now. ‘Cut the crap.’

Dazai’s tone switched from light and bemused to chilly and omniscient, his gaze matching the coldness in his voice. ‘It’s true and you know it.’

Chuuya should have seen this coming. The past few hours had taught him that any attempt to coerce Dazai into offering a reasonable, inoffensive explanation was bound to go nowhere, so maybe asking in the first place was not such a good idea in hindsight.

Instead of bothering to grace Dazai’s taunt with a proper answer, Chuuya gave him a menacing look and retreated into the bathroom to put on the dog onesie. Dazai, too, changed into a simple pale blue pyjama before Chuuya returned.

When Chuuya emerged from the bathroom dressed in the fluffy dog onesie, Dazai could not suppress the urge to sneer and giggle. With the onesie on and his short stature, Chuuya looked ludicrous and cute.

Chuuya’s face turned red from either anger or embarrassment, he could not tell. ‘Don’t cackle at me like that, you son of a bitch!’

He immediately regretted his horrendous choice of words. ‘I beg to differ! You’re clearly the real son of a bitch here,’ Dazai laughed at his own joke while Chuuya facepalmed. Chuuya had to admit, he provided Dazai more fuel to poke fun at him and walked straight into that one.

‘I’m not a dog, no matter what stupid shit you say!’ That is when Dazai got the best idea. Too bad his idea would have to wait. ‘Can we go to sleep now?’ In all honesty, Chuuya was not even particularly sleepy, he just noticed that the ‘we need to sleep’ excuse seemed to be relatively effective and had had enough of Dazai’s nonsense.

‘Sure thing, you need sleep to grow after all.’ If Chuuya had to hear one more of Dazai’s snide insults soon, he swore he would tear the place down. Screw Dazai and the mafia, screw Arahabaki, screw the Sheep, he would fucking destroy everything –

-- no.

Chuuya could feel the unknown shadowy feeling of dread looming over him. He took in a deep breath and exhaled, counting down from ten mentally. Despite having never had the option of testing out what that weird feeling was, he had an inkling that it was something terrible. Now was not the moment to cause a scene; he had the Sheep’s wellbeing to take into account. For the Sheep’s safety, he would endure anything, even being around the most annoying person he had ever met for extended periods of time without bashing his head in.
‘Don’t come anywhere near my side of the bed,’ Dazai said as he splattered himself over the bed, bringing Chuuya out of his thoughts.

‘Hah? That goes to you! Trust me, I wouldn’t want to be any closer than a country away from you.’

A few seconds later, the hesitant pair was lying down in bed with the lights off. The bed was split firmly in two parts, with Chuuya to Dazai’s left so as not to risk bumping into his injured right arm on accident. Chuuya stood with his back to Dazai and Dazai would have done the same thing had it not required him to lean on his wounded arm. Dazai hated pain and he did not want to go through any more of that. Having his arm broken by the pint of fury next to him and having to spend some of the day with him had been painful enough.

Usually, when Dazai was in bed waiting for sleep to come, his loneliness amplified until it was hardly bearable anymore. Chugging down some strong alcohol was one of the few things that could keep it at bay, so he did it often, especially if he had to do something important that could not wait in the morning. It was his method to help himself fall asleep in spite of his inner desolation. Frequently, he stayed up all night until the bleak darkness vanished into morning, only coping with his horrible sleep schedule thanks to afternoon naps.

Somehow, he did not feel that tonight. He could not claim that he sincerely felt something, but surprisingly, he did not feel nothing. Was that what being at peace was? In the tranquillity of this moonlit night, with a warm blanket wrapped over the two of them and away from the hecticness of the mafia and city, the atmosphere could only have been described as… peaceful. Maybe it was just their quietude and the lack of background noise that made it seem so. Either way, Chuuya had certainly let his guard down due to his exhaustion, so this appeared to be a most opportune moment for Dazai to tackle his remaining tasks for the day.

‘Hey, Chuuya?’ Dazai whispered softly.

‘What is it?’ They had barely been in bed for a few minutes and Chuuya already sounded half-asleep. Must have been the type of person who fell asleep at the drop of a hat. How lucky. Dazai told himself he was definitely not jealous of that.

‘Do you do this with the Sheep a lot?’

‘You mean sleeping in the same bed?’ Chuuya was officially confused. He could not fathom why the Sheep’s sleeping habits were suddenly relevant. ‘Why do you even want to know that?’

‘Out of curiosity. I’ve never actually stayed around people my own age, not even around those who are in the mafia,’ Dazai confessed. He was not exactly well-versed in what kids his age were doing or how they interacted with each other. In the Port Mafia, there were not many teenagers or children, and those young people who were in the mafia tended to be either psychopaths or prostitutes, with a few unwilling orphans with no other place to go sprinkled in. As Mori’s right-hand man and ward, he had neither the time nor the interest to socialise with the other teenagers. He was so far detached from their mentality that he could not even hope to comprehend them. All he wanted was to die, for real.

However, in order to grasp the full picture of how to destroy the bond between Chuuya and the Sheep, he needed to know more. He had no need for more boring documents and second-hand information. What he did need was first-hand information from someone who truly knew the Sheep. Furthermore, he had to check what Chuuya thought and felt about the Sheep so as to work out how to approach the situation for maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Chuuya found Dazai’s random inquiry weird, but he supposed that there was no harm in indulging
him. It was not as if such a harmless question could have grave consequences, not if he was careful about what he revealed. He turned around to look at Dazai through the darkness as he spoke, never mind that he could not really see him, moonlight gently outlining his features. ‘Not necessarily. Most of us have a roommate, but don’t share a bed. I don’t share a room, though I used to in the past. We have sleepovers quite often, especially if there’s a special occasion like someone’s birthday or a celebration like Christmas. When we’re free, we gather to watch stuff, play games, talk and just hang out together. It usually ends up with at least a few people falling asleep in random places around the living room, so I guess that counts. None of us are genuinely awkward with each other and we wouldn’t think anything of it if we had to share a bed. Honestly, I’m lucky they welcomed me into their group. They’re my best friends and siblings at the same time.’

‘Chuuya really cares about the Sheep, doesn’t he?’ Dazai mumbled, wondering how he could be as fortunate and foolish as to feel such strong emotions towards a group which was just utilising him for their own benefit.

‘Of course I do.’ Chuuya’s voice was fond, prompting Dazai to glance at him to analyse his expression. His lips were curled up in a little affectionate smile. Moonlight reflected in his blue eyes, the contrast between the darkness and soothing moonlight accentuating them. He looked… pure. For the first time since they met the day before, he did not appear as if he was on the lookout for danger, stressed or infuriated. If Dazai had to describe it, he would say that for a short moment, Chuuya let him glimpse into his heart, though it might have just been the case that the dog onesie helped confer a false impression of harmlessness and innocence which could be mistaken for that. ‘They gave me a purpose in life. Without them, I would be nothing. I owe them so much and I can’t even dream of repaying them.’

‘I think you’ve repaid them more than enough over and over again,’ Dazai stated in a matter-of-fact manner.

Chuuya let out a sad chuckle. ‘No, I haven’t. There are some debts that can never be repaid.’ He let it at that before he divulged more of his hidden feelings. Even if they were just two boys having some pillow-talk before bed right now, they were still members of opposing organisations at the end of the day. He could not tell Dazai all about his decision to dedicate his life to the Sheep and how much he wished for the Sheep to be safe and prosper, no matter how huge a burden he would have to take upon his shoulders. He would do anything for the Sheep and he knew it, but he could not have the enemy know just how deep his feelings truly ran. An organisation such as the Port Mafia would simply wield his own feelings as weapons against him.

‘Yes, for example the Sheep’s debt to you,’ the brunet muttered. ‘Can’t you see? Most of the Sheep’s success is thanks to you alone. That’s why they keep you around, sticking to someone strong for survival, to suck every drop of energy and your last breath out of you for their own profit.’

‘That isn’t the only reason why!’ Chuuya sounded outraged and anxious at the same time, desperately trying to endorse the Sheep. How he delivered that sentence told Dazai more than the sentence itself. In spite of the bond between him and the Sheep, which was represented by his indignation at the accusation, he said ‘only reason’, not just ‘reason’, meaning that he recognised a primary motive why the Sheep kept him around was his ability. Had he wholly believed the Sheep cared for him as a human above all, he would not have added the extra word. His tone disclosed a hint of concern, signifying that a small part of him thought the Sheep cared for his ability and nothing else, although he shushed that part of himself and buried it away into the most obscure corners of his mind. Paired with Chuuya’s insistence that he was no leader, it could have been the case that Chuuya was questioning his own leadership and that he was en route to cracking under the pressure of being the King of Sheep. Perhaps there was some internal conflict within the Sheep
that made Chuuya second-guess himself. Even if there was none, it was obvious that the Sheep’s over-reliance on Chuuya could lead to them blaming Chuuya for every failure. Chuuya’s dedication to the Sheep would make him consider himself the one at blame in such scenarios even without the Sheep blaming him for anything, hence where the insecurity emerged from. Dazai could work with that and chip away at the tiniest cracks in the connection between Chuuya and the Sheep. It was time to start planting the seeds of doubt.

‘You like to think they care about you. How silly and utterly human of you. Would they have taken you in without your ability, though? Would you have mattered to them had you not been strong? Hell, they haven’t even sent anyone to help you out or to check on your status, which makes me wonder, do you even matter to them as anything but free muscle now?’

‘Stop right there, you bastard!’ Faster than lightning, Chuuya was on Dazai, straddling him while his hands were wrapped around his throat. Dazai did not have to turn on the light to infer that he was livid and wanted nothing more than to strangle him to death. Under any other circumstance, he would have made a sexual joke about choking and the intimate position they were in, but he was sure Chuuya would literally crush his windpipe if he did that. Being choked to death did not sound bad, but he knew the fiery redhead would make it hurt, if only to torture him due to Dazai’s earlier mention of his hatred for pain. ‘Did you ask me about the Sheep just to talk trash about them? Because I won’t tolerate that kind of gibberish from someone who’s never even met them! The Sheep believe in me. They know I can look after myself. That’s all there is to it.’ Ending his sentence, he got off Dazai and rolled back on his side to sleep. ‘Now shut the fuck up and let me sleep. Goodnight, jerk. May nightmares haunt your dreams.’

‘You’re awful,’ Dazai grumbled. ‘Goodnight, pipsqueak.’

Sleep took its sweet time to come to Dazai that night. His mind was restless after Chuuya oh-so-generously wished him nightmares and would not shut up about how nice it would be to find a reason to live like Chuuya found in the Sheep. He had to acknowledge that Chuuya’s devotion was commendable. Never had he ever met anyone with such a level of sheer fidelity that it bordered on willing ignorance. No, ignorance was not the best word to describe it: Chuuya was fully aware that he was being used and let himself be used constantly, regardless of the enormous responsibility placed on him, all for the good of others. With his strength and ability, he could categorically seek out another organisation or other employment, yet he remained in a weak organisation to protect them as gratitude for accepting him into their ranks in the first place. How romantic.

A person who sensed nothing but a void inside like Dazai could only attempt to imagine how that combination of complete trust, faith and love must have felt. Was it a warm, peaceful feeling that brought upon happiness? Or did it hurt like an invisible needle through the heart? How could such emotions rationalise the irrational decision that was fighting on the losing side, where there was less safety in numbers? Seriously, safety in numbers was his reason for rejecting the Sheep’s offer to join them all those years ago; it was hard to picture anyone with a working brain making another choice. Perhaps those feelings were so amazing that people forgot about the logical disadvantages? He briefly wondered if they felt better than morphine, if they could possibly make him feel human when nothing else had succeeded. Nonetheless, he had no hope that he could ever discover a reason to live the way Chuuya did and sample those feelings. Accepting his irrevocable state once again, Dazai decided to put his brainpower to better use and come up with an action plan based on the information he gained from Chuuya tonight.

Dazai had detected the sudden pause in Chuuya’s monologue about him being indebted to the Sheep. It stopped at an unnatural point where Chuuya did not proceed to give any justification for his belief, even though most people would have reinforced their point and tried to defend it, which could only mean Chuuya was withholding details from him and hoped that his supposedly
profound, insightful comment would end the conversation. He had to give it to Chuuya, that was a shrewd tactic on his side. Whether the information being hidden was details about what the Sheep did for him or what Chuuya felt, Dazai could not be certain. To clarify what it was, he would have to witness how the Sheep acted around Chuuya in person. Mixing what he had learnt with the fact that he had to ingrain doubt about Chuuya into the Sheep, a plan started to form before he drifted off into a thankfully dreamless slumber.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

When it comes to stories like this, I do not like to rewrite the whole scenes in canon, so I will just mention them or summarise them quickly since we all know what happened in them. Unless otherwise specified, assume things happened just like in canon.

However, keep in mind that the anime and the Fifteen light novel are not an exact match. I have not finished reading the light novel (I am reading it in Japanese, so it is taking a while), but what I did read has overwritten the anime to me.

Last note: The entire case from the first Randou talk to the second talk seems to be solved in one day in canon, but because I want to build their relationship a bit more before that, I moved the second Randou talk to the next day.

Unfortunately for Chuuya, he was an eternally ungraceful and messy sleeper prone to moving around too much when asleep. That was part of why he did not have a roommate in the Sheep anymore. When he woke up, he felt warmth. He was not firmly on his side of the bed as he had originally been. Instead, he was holding on to Dazai with his left arm over his chest, his left leg splattered over him and his face buried in the boy’s shoulder.

Well, crap. He hoped Dazai was not awake yet, because if he was, Chuuya would die of embarrassment and apologise instantly. Chuuya was glad that at least he did not sleep over Dazai’s hurt right arm; that would have been much worse than ending up too close for comfort.

‘I told the dumb dog not to come anywhere near my side of the bed,’ Dazai said in what must have been the world’s most bored-sounding tone ever. His voice was husky and a bit deeper than normal, though it lacked some of the hostility and guarded distancing from the day before. ‘Was that too complex for your miniature brain to comprehend?’

Chuuya grabbed the pillow that his asleep self deemed unnecessary and shoved it down on Dazai’s face. All thoughts of apologising for the awkward position caused by him moving around when sleeping disappeared. He promptly turned around, going as far away from Dazai as he could without getting out of bed. ‘It’s not my fault I move around when I sleep, okay? Everyone does it!’

‘Then how come I haven’t budged an inch since last night?’ Chuuya shifted so he could see Dazai’s position and confirmed that Dazai was, in fact, right where he had been when he fell asleep. Great.

‘Did you even sleep?’ Had Dazai not slept, that would have explained it, although Chuuya knew it was a futile question to ask. He could clearly hear it in his morning voice that he did indeed go to sleep, not to mention that had Dazai been awake for a long time, he would have pried Chuuya off him by now. For the most part, he asked that question just to be petty and prevent himself from beating Dazai within an inch of his life.

‘Yes.’ Better than he wanted to admit. He actually fell asleep under the cover of darkness without alcohol and did not have any nightmares. That sure was a rarity. Perhaps the self-consciousness of
having someone in bed next to him was enough to prevent his nightmares from waking him up. He would have to take note of that and try this hypothesis later with beautiful ladies.

Now that they were both awake, it was time to get to business. Chuuya was eager to get this shit over with, ensure his friends were safe and go back home. Speaking of the mission, it was then that Chuuya realised he had no idea what was in store for the day.

‘What are we doing today?’ Chuuya asked. He knew they were going to ‘investigate’, whatever the fuck that meant in this context, but he had been given very little information about what they were meant to do during the investigation itself. Hell, he did not even know how to carry out a proper investigation in the Port Mafia’s style. As part of the Sheep’s Council, he did assist with planning and directing the organisation, but the main strategist was Shirase, not him; he was more accustomed to doing the physical work and fighting his way through his problems.

‘You’ll see.’ Dazai seemed intent on not telling him anything. Just the kind of bullshit Chuuya wanted to deal with first thing in the morning.

‘Care to elaborate?’

Dazai turned and flashed him his most innocent closed eyes smile. ‘Nope!’ If he wanted to make sure Chuuya could not betray the mafia and that he did not seem fishy when he did something behind Chuuya’s back, he had to keep him in the dark. To be sincere, he was willing to tell him where they were going, but being transparent about what they were going to do before suddenly freezing up and refusing to tell him anything if he had a confidential phone call or one-to-one meeting with Mori could have made him realise something was happening behind the scenes. This way, he would assume that whatever was occurring in secret was just something mundane and the mafia simply put no faith in him whatsoever.

‘For fuck’s sake, if you want us to work together on this, you have to keep me in the loop!’

‘Or else what? You’re going to beat me up and let your beloved Sheep have their faces pushed into the pavement and get shot three times in the chest for your insubordination?’

Damn, he had him there. His hands were metaphorically tied behind his back. He sighed, resigning himself to another day of bullshittery, confusion and being on the brink of committing murder in a fit of rage. ‘Fine, whatever. Can we start investigating already?’

Dazai mimicked Chuuya’s sigh upon seeing his over-eagerness and prepared himself for a full day of being with the most frustrating and impatient kid whom he had ever met. They got ready to leave and were out the door within half an hour.

The pair stopped at a quiet high-end café under Port Mafia jurisdiction to have a late breakfast. Surprisingly, they had a pleasant enough chat filled with friendly jabs at each other after they got their insult exchange out of their system. Neither could assert that their breakfast together had been horrid. Then, they started walking towards some unknown place.

On the way, Chuuya kept pestering Dazai about their destination. He did not trust Dazai not to lead him straight into a trap and was already losing his patience, not that he had much of that to begin with. Honestly, he just wanted to finish this and go home. Would it really have hurt the cursed mummy that much to tell him where they were going? Even Dazai got annoyed after being asked the same question dozens of times.

Ultimately, after badgering Dazai to hell and back, Chuuya discovered that they were going to the sub-executive Randou’s house to interview him. Before Chuuya could process that information, an
explosion came into view, prompting the unwilling pair to rush to the origin of the explosion. Perfect, a fight was just what Chuuya needed to release some of the aggression he had accumulated over the past few days!

The fight went as well as anticipated. Chuuya had never lost a fight and he was not going to start now. As for Dazai, he stayed away from the GSS’s firing range with an impassive look on his face, silently marvelling at the demonstration of power and strength that was unfolding in front of him. Chuuya might have been deceivingly small, but he had surpassed all of Dazai’s expectations. The rumours did not do him justice. Seeing Chuuya fight was so downright breath-taking that Dazai could swear his heart almost stopped. He could not help admiring how alive Chuuya seemed as he defeated opponent after opponent, like a tempest taking the world by storm. By the looks of it, he was enjoying himself too. It was exhilarating to watch.

Secretly, Dazai wished that he, too, could find something that made him feel like that. Even though he refused to admit it, he wanted to see more of this, of the pure display of humanity that was Chuuya. Yes, Chuuya was overconfident, immature and ridiculous at times (how did he even think that asking Dazai to play heavy rock music during the fight was acceptable?), but if this is what the mafia was like, then perhaps joining it might not have been that bad.

Amidst the death and destruction that took over the battlefield as if a horseman of the apocalypse were released stood Chuuya. Despite being literally surrounded by death, Chuuya resembled a fire that could not be put out, untainted by the destruction around him. But there was one more remnant of life around, one which he had forgotten about. The last GSS member Chuuya fought was still alive, so Dazai strolled towards him.

When the first bullet pierced the man’s chest, Dazai started laughing maniacally. Having unlimited power over life and death, even for just one person, gave him hope that one day, he will succeed in obliterating his own existence. The death that he so craved encircled them, and taking a life had been so easy, yet every attempt he had made on his own life failed. Fate must surely like irony. He emptied more rounds into the body, scorning death for coming so zealously for others while ignoring his desire to cease existing over and over again. Why was death this way? Perhaps the man he had shot had a family. He definitely had comrades who cared for him, at least. So why was death as merciful as to take this man for whom others might weep instead of Dazai, who had nothing and no one to lose? Life was not fair, and it seemed death was not either.

A kick brought Dazai back from the high and surge of power he got due to the knowledge that he had held a person’s life in his hands and ended it as if it were a fragile leaf. When Chuuya told him to quit shooting uselessly, Dazai could not recognise a hint of his usual anger. His expression was one of wonder befitting of a teen his age, which puzzled Dazai due to its honesty. There was one other thing he could tell from his expression: that Chuuya appeared to be more practical and have more morals than Dazai had initially thought. While he obviously enjoyed fighting and did not mind killing, it appeared that he took no pleasure in murder and that he did not engage in such acts without a good reason. The mafia could work with that.

Witnessing Dazai shooting the corpse like a madman left Chuuya flummoxed. Was he seriously forced to work with a psychopath? No, that could not be it. Dazai was… strange, to say the least, but he seemed more broken than anything. And the worst part about it all was that Dazai was under the impression that no one could see and understand just how scarred he was on the inside.

Chuuuya had seen many troubled kids in his life. He was raised by them and grew up with them. Because of that, he had become very perceptive and attuned to other people’s emotions, moods and mental states, even if he was not incredible at handling his own. From the moment he met Dazai, that nagging feeling that something was deeply wrong refused to leave him. His emotionless
behaviour was beyond abnormal, and if Chuuya had learnt anything by spending time around others his age, it was that those who put on such a façade are plagued by severe issues, abuse and depression. Perceiving that Dazai fell under that category had been as much of a challenge as stealing candy from a child. He had not known the other boy for long enough to pin down what was troubling him, and to be blunt, he was not sure that he even cared, considering that this guy was part of the group holding his friends hostage. Yet, his instinct to look out for others did not seem to go away; in fact, it magnified whenever he saw him.

Nonetheless, Chuuya had to set his priorities straight. His aims were to save the Sheep and get information on Arahabaki. He could tackle the walking problem he had known for roughly two or three days afterwards. For now, he would do nothing and continue towards his goal.

As they walked into the ruined house, Dazai could not get over just how simple it had been to pull the trigger and bloody his hands for the first time. It happened in an instant with no resistance, no dramatic action or anything remotely interesting. Dazai believed that he might feel something if he committed as unforgivable an act as murder, only to discover that now that he had done it, he felt just as empty as ever. However, this was not the moment to wallow in his thoughts. Regardless of how much Dazai would have liked to think about how the nothingness inside of him augmented with the kill, he had to concentrate on the task at hand: interviewing Randou.

Dazai’s minor psychotic episode aside, visiting Randou had proven useful. Now that he had all the information he needed, the only thing left to do was to set up the trap for Chuuya and the Sheep. He pulled out his phone to double-check that the odds were in his favour.

Throughout the day, Dazai had received constant updates on the Sheep’s movements. He had been waiting for an opportunity to sour the relationship between Chuuya and the Sheep. While at Randou’s place, he learnt that the Sheep were aware of Chuuya’s potential betrayal, making it the perfect time to strike. Under the current appropriate circumstances, he determined that now was a most opportune moment for Chuuya’s supposed betrayal to begin. To that avail, he purposefully pissed Chuuya off to the point that he wanted to beat Dazai senseless and proposed that they go to an arcade on the way back since they were not allowed to fight each other. This was his chance. If everything went according to plan, the Sheep would lose their trust in Chuuya. As a safety net, he had his men rig the game so that Chuuya would lose, intending to make joining the mafia the order he could give Chuuya thanks to the win, just in case the Sheep still held on to him after this.

And the plan did go smoothly. Dazai had ensured that they took a path where members of the Sheep had been sighted within the past hour and that they always remained within their range of detection. He wanted the Sheep to see them and confront them so he could create the rift. Just as planned, while they were at the arcade, the Sheep came to them. He was ready to execute his part in Mori’s plot.

…Or not.

For a second, Dazai hesitated. Last night, he had listened to Chuuya talking about his fellow Sheep. The fondness and love that he held for them and his kind nature radiated from him so visibly that it was impossible to ignore even beneath his violent temper and prowess, and, quite frankly, it was astounding.Briefly, he thought that maybe, just maybe it would be better if he ditched Mori’s scheme and claimed there was no way for him to instigate conflict between Chuuya and the Sheep. It was not as if they had unrestricted contact with the Sheep, so it would be understandable if he failed to convince the Sheep that Chuuya was something he would never be, a traitor.

Dazai pushed those thoughts away as soon as they passed through his mind. Mori and the mafia aside, letting Chuuya go back to the Sheep did not sit right with him. As much as he disliked
Chuuya, he disliked seeing him acting akin to a lamb thrown to a pack of wolves around the Sheep more. Besides, the Sheep were dead meat without Chuuya. No one contributed more than their King and without him, their defence was borderline non-existent. Not to mention that things seemed a bit… tense between Chuuya and the Sheep, if how Chuuya behaved the previous night and their conversation was anything to judge from. It was only a matter of time before either Chuuya was pushed out or the Sheep met their demise.

On the flip hand, he was having difficulty picturing someone who could care that much about anyone excluding himself being truly happy and at his best in the mafia. Dazai did not particularly want Chuuya in the mafia, not just because he hated him, but also because of his overall nature. If Dazai was a soulless monster who was destined to thrive in the mafia, Chuuya was his opposite. He could see Chuuya rising through the ranks fast and being extremely useful, albeit from what he had seen of his relentless attempt to save his friends no matter the cost he incurred, there was a significant chance that as he was now, he was too humane for the mafia. The mafia would have to deal with that somehow. Either way, one thing was for sure: he wanted to pull him out of the toxic environment that was the Sheep. The mafia might not have been much better, but at least it was not going to be destroyed soon. With that thought in mind, Dazai became determined to make the call.

The call had the desired effect of making the Sheep suspicious of Chuuya when Chuuya chose to stay with Dazai. That boy, Shirase, seemed paranoid, so there was no doubt that the Sheep would fall for the bait. One unexpected effect resulted from the call, though. After the Sheep left the arcade, Chuuya said something which Dazai never thought he would hear.

‘Dazai.’ Chuuya started, his voice demure and serious. Whatever it was that he had to say, Dazai was eager to hear it, for he could not fathom why he sounded like that.

‘Yes, shorty?’

‘Thank you.’ Wait, what? Dazai was officially bewildered. Before Dazai could tease him, he continued. ‘For releasing the hostages. I know you’re most likely running on a hidden agenda and that you didn’t do it out of the goodness of your heart, but even so, not having to worry about their safety means a lot to me.’

Dazai swallowed the bile forming in his throat. ‘…You truly are a fool, aren’t you?’ He was an enemy who was purposefully trying to take him away from the only family he had ever known, and yet, here Chuuya was, thanking him for doing something to progress with his mission without suspecting what his real intentions were. That took a special kind of stupidity.

Chuuya’s temper flared up once again, all hints of the tone he had mere seconds ago gone. ‘No, I’m not!’

‘Then, I’ll give you one day to figure out the culprit,’ Dazai stated with narrowed eyes and a finger on the corner of his lips, which were curled up slightly in a mischievous smile. Had Chuuya not been too angry and salty to think, he might not have ignored the feeling that said smile spelt trouble. ‘If you’re so smart, one day should be more than enough.’

‘I don’t even need until tomorrow to reveal who did it, damn it! I can catch the culprit tonight if I want to!’

Dazai could not let that happen. ‘No, you can’t, because we aren’t doing anything else for the rest of the day.’ First, he had to report to Mori and await new orders. If he was the one tasked with ending the mission, he needed time to corner the culprit without drawing suspicion to himself. Doing anything else today would have been too much of an indicative that he had deduced what transpired in reality, which would have put the culprit on guard. His opponent was almost in
checkmate and Dazai did not intend to allow his strategy to be foiled by an impatient midget.

Their investigation coming to an end so early was news to Chuuya. He had expected them to wrap the case up today, especially if it was so transparent that Dazai had apparently pinpointed the culprit already. 'Why’s that?'

'I have to go report to Mori. By the time I’m back, we won’t have time to apprehend the culprit even if by some miracle, you guess who it is. Think of it as me doing you a favour and actually giving you a chance to win our bet.' This whole ordeal did not sit well with Chuuya. Why was he not allowed to deliver the report together with Dazai? What was Dazai doing? Why was he leaving him once more when he was meant to watch him? He was certainly up to something shady and Chuuya did not like that.

With that, the pair parted. Dazai went to deliver the report while Chuuya was taken back to Dazai’s flat by Hirotsu for the second day in a row.

Mori was waiting for Dazai to arrive to report when his phone rang. After glancing at the caller ID, Mori picked up the call. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello, boss,’ a gruff voice said from the other end of the line.

‘How are things going?’

‘They’re progressing just as planned, boss.’

‘Lovely, thank you. How are the GSS holding up?’ Mori asked. He had ordered for the GSS headquarters to be attacked in order to push them further into desperation and give them incentive to seek out the alliance that needed to be formed for his plan to succeed.

‘They’re on edge and their numbers have been decimated.’ Amazing. The curtain was beginning to set.

‘Noted. How was the meeting?’ The person that Mori was conversing with was his spy in the GSS. The man was a GSS veteran in a high position, having been in the organisation for a long time. Alas, the GSS needed funds a bit too much (arguably even more so than the Sheep), so the moment Mori promised the man that he would make him rich in exchange for his information and collaboration, he agreed to become a traitor. The damage sustained when the Port Mafia struck was bound to increase the need for funds even further.

‘I made the proposal.’ He was referring to recommending an alliance against the Port Mafia between the GSS and the Sheep. Even combined, Mori knew that they would not be strong enough to defeat the Port Mafia, but together, they had a higher chance of surviving, which was the trap he wanted them to walk into so he could obliterate them simultaneously.

‘How did they react?’ Their reaction would set in stone whether Mori’s plan could move forward or not, so he had to check.

‘They have their doubts and postponed the decision, but it seems they’ll give it a try if the Sheep’s offer is high enough. I think they need more encouragement, and while I expect the negotiations to take a while, they will succeed eventually.’ That was troublesome. So, the GSS needed more
incentive, eh? He would give them more incentive, then. Mori made a mental note to check if Dazai advanced things on his side of the mission in order for all the pieces to fall into place.

‘Understood, thank you. Is that all? Did anything out of the ordinary happen?’ He had to account for any extraneous variables and unforeseen circumstances. If anything popped up, Mori would mitigate its effects without delay. Now that Chuuya was so close to joining the mafia, he was not going to permit anything to derail the mission.

‘That’s everything, sir. Nothing unexpected on my side.’ Exactly what Mori liked to hear.

‘If that’s the case, I’ll let you be. As always, thank you for your assistance. Let me know if anything comes up.’

‘Of course, I will. Talk to you tomorrow, boss.’

‘Goodbye.’ The phone call ended.

Mori’s idea was to bring the GSS and Sheep together to save him the trouble of having to deal with two different independent actors and exterminate them separately. It is easier to keep an eye on and go against one opponent than two, after all. Without Chuuya, the Sheep would lose their primary line of defence, but in order to decide to expel Chuuya under suspicion of treason, they needed assurance that they would not be left unprotected. That was the GSS’s role. For that objective, he instilled fear into the GSS to make them contemplate a coalition against their common enemy. Now, all he had to do was wait to see if Dazai managed to create friction between Chuuya and the Sheep so that the Sheep would see the partnership with the GSS as a prerequisite for their survival.

A knock was heard on the door. ‘I’m coming in,’ Dazai’s bored voice emerged from the other side of the door. What good timing!

‘Welcome, Dazai,’ Mori greeted when the boy entered his office. ‘Take a seat.’

‘How kind of you! And here I was, going to sit on an air chair,’ Dazai said sarcastically.

‘Feel free to do so for all I care.’

Dazai proceeded to do precisely that.

Mori had not expected his protégé to pick that moment to be the little shit he was. ‘Dazai, stop messing around and sit down. I want to hear your report.’

Dazai flashed him an impish and resentful smile while going to the nearest chair. ‘Apologies, boss, I’m unfortunately not in the best mood since I had to spend the day with an unnerving brat.’

‘So you spent the day by yourself?’

‘A short unnerving brat,’ he corrected himself. Afterwards, he described today’s events.

‘Fascinating. What do you think, Dazai?’ Mori asked him, giving him his full attention. He spoke in an expectant tone indicating that this whole fiasco was indeed a mere test. A test that Dazai was acing, if he may add.

Dazai smirked in response, his hollow eyes sending Mori an intimidating and scary look that would have made anyone else shiver. The feeling that Mori had made a mistake when he picked this boy as his accomplice since he was darker and wiser than Mori’s initial judgment made him out to be returned. ‘The one behind the old boss and Arahabaki’s appearance is none other than Randou and
he’s in cahoots with the GSS.’

That piqued Mori’s interest. His hands were clasped together as his joyful malicious grin widened. He prompted Dazai to explain his thought process, so Dazai went on to discuss how Randou was clearly lying, and the only possible motive he could have had for lying was that he was the culprit. With the GSS possessing notes on manufacturing black explosions, it became obvious to Dazai that Randou and GSS were accomplices in this case. Why would the GSS have manufactured those explosions otherwise? The GSS could have known about the aspect of the flames from rumours, so they did not need Randou’s testimony about them, but the explosions and the old boss appearing concurrently could only have made sense if they were working together. As for why the explosions existed, they served both to confer legitimacy to the Arahabaki story and to disguise who was behind the old boss’ appearance. The fact that the GSS attacked Randou’s house just at the right time when Dazai and Chuuya were almost there was meant to distract them from discerning the truth and put Randou above all suspicion. Their timing had been so impeccable that Dazai would not have been surprised had Randou ordered the attack the moment either he or the GSS heard of them approaching. In other words, Randou was a traitor who was usurping Mori’s power and conspiring with an enemy for some unknown reason. But where did Arahabaki fit in all of this? Dazai could not figure out the relationship between Randou and Arahabaki yet, not that it mattered since he could solve his case without knowing that.

Mori applauded gleefully. ‘Excellent reasoning! Anything else to report?’

‘No.’ His normal perfunctory voice replaced his earlier icy tone which betrayed that his intelligence was far beyond his years. How he switched from one mood to another would have been moderately disturbing had Mori not been used to this kind of behaviour and not any better himself. ‘What about you? How’s the situation going in general?’ Dazai had begun his side of the operation in dragging Chuuya out of the Sheep, so he needed assurance that it was not going to be in vain due to external considerations.

‘Everything’s in order.’ Dazai did not need to be informed of the existence of his spy in the GSS or of the fact that the negotiations between the Sheep and the GSS would take a while longer, so Mori changed the subject. ‘Say, Dazai, how will you deal with Randou?’

‘Oh, so you’re dumping the task of dealing with your unruly sub-executive on me? That’s totally unfair! I’m nowhere near high up enough in the hierarchy for that, you know… Can’t you just tell one of your lackeys to handle it?’ How bothersome. Dazai did not want to do any more work than he needed to. It was already too much work since he had to put up with Chuuya of all people while sneaking behind his back. His job had been to unearth who the culprit was, and he had accomplished that. The two reasons why he had not exposed Randou yet were to mess with Chuuya and to ensure whoever had to tackle the issue had enough time to seize Randou. He had hoped that the person who would have to do that would not be him, but undoubtedly, the universe must not have listened to his wish, just like it had not listened to his wish to die for the past years.

‘You are one of my lackeys, Dazai, and it’s your case. It makes sense that you would see it through to the end. Besides, I’m sure Chuuya would love to have a word with Randou when you’re done with him. We won’t have that if I tell one of my other subordinates because they will just kill Randou on sight, wouldn’t you agree?’ Mori replied with the same even tone and jubilant smile he had had for the entirety of the conversation, as if he had not just talked about the imminent death of his sub-executive. Dazai concluded that he did indeed know what was up before Dazai told him, or else, he might have looked or sounded mildly surprised.

‘Fine.’ Dazai sighed. Truth to be told, he had not excluded this possibility, leading to him devising a plan for it. ‘I’m going to ask Randou to meet me in an abandoned building so we can set up a
welcome party for Chuuya.’ The only people who were in the loop regarding the secret Chuuya recruitment campaign at that moment were Mori, Dazai, Hirotsu and Randou, so asking Randou to meet him alone for that aim was plausible enough. It was the kind of plan that would have screamed ‘you’re about to get whacked’ had Mori himself ordered it and both of them were aware of that, hence why it had to be someone new and seemingly unthreatening such as Dazai who executed it. ‘There, Chuuya and I will confront him. Sounds good enough?’

‘Perfect. Have your squad on standby just in case things go south. Affairs like this are often unpredictable, so you should always prepare yourself for every single outcome.’

‘Will do.’ Of course he was going to do that! He was no idiot; he had realised the importance of accounting for even the most unlikely of occurrences long ago. Yet again, Dazai wondered why Mori was telling him those things.

‘I’ll see you for your next report tomorrow once you’re done. Let Chuuya go after you manage the issue with the previous boss. This mission might be over, but don’t forget your real mission.’

‘Understood.’ With the curt reply, Dazai hoped he could now leave, purely because he wanted to get the hell out of Mori’s office and go back to his flat. He was exhausted and while he had fun teasing Chuuya today, he simply wanted the day to end so they could skip to the real action. ‘Can I go now?’

Mori stifled a laugh at how keen Dazai seemed to return home. ‘Sure. See you tomorrow, Dazai.’

‘Goodbye.’ Dazai exited the office. He had to call Randou, but doing so in plain view was not safe and neither was chatting with him with Chuuya around (he could not let Chuuya overhear the true reason why he was meeting Randou in an abandoned building the next day, no matter what), so he got into the car with black tinted windows which was waiting for him outside. Calling Randou on the ride home was the optimal course of action.

A short phone call later, Randou had agreed to join him in organising the party. In fact, he appeared to be looking forward to it for some mysterious reason. Could it have been related to the relationship between Randou and Arahabaki?

Out of a sudden, the car stopped, snapping Dazai out of his train of thought. ‘Hey, what’s happening?’ It was probably nothing, just roadworks and blocked streets due to an accident or maintenance works or something like that, although he had to verify that in case it was something serious.

The driver turned around with a gun pointed at Dazai’s head. ‘Don’t move or I’ll shoot!’

‘Would you, really? Are you an angel who’s come to finally grant my wish and put me out of my misery?’ Dazai asked with the most cheerful smile he had had in years and a sparkle in his eyes, lighting up as if it was Christmas. ‘Well, then, please, shoot me. Make it quick, okay? I don’t like pain.’ He put his head right in front of the gun’s barrel, moving it so that it was pointed square at the middle of his forehead.

Needless to say, the driver was perplexed, though he did not lower his pistol.

Bang.

As the driver was caught so off-guard by Dazai’s antics that he was rendered speechless, he did not see it coming when the boy had pulled his own pistol out of his coat and shot him dead.

The most depressing aspect of this exchange to Dazai was that the driver had never intended to kill
him. Had he been out for blood, he would have killed Dazai without a single warning. Having bothered to attempt to threaten him, that meant that his goal was to capture Dazai, not to bestow the sweet release of death upon him. That was why Dazai pulled the trigger. He had no need to waste time on a most likely painful kidnapping, thank you very much.

Next, he cogituated on the most suitable course of action. He could not exactly chill in the car until someone found him. For all he knew, the car might have had a bomb on it. Calling for help would take too long. Given that whoever tried to kidnap him might not have been working on his own, that meant his accomplices or whatever surely knew where he was too. He had to get out of there before reinforcements showed up.

Dazai gave his surroundings a careful look-over before getting out of the car in order to make sure that he had not been driven into a trap. Nothing. Stepping out of the car warily, he started walking into a random direction so as to lose any followers prior to arriving home. More than ever, he wanted to be back at his flat annoying the hell out of a certain shrimp right now.

In an ironic twist of fate, in spite of Dazai’s eagerness to go home, his bad luck hit him like a train right at that moment. He had barely made it around the corner when several men with guns blocked his way. They were all wearing the same uniform. Dazai recognised said uniform to belong to the GSS. Previously, he had not believed that the GSS’s leader was smart enough to pull off this kind of abduction attempt, though he was definitely cold-hearted enough, not that it would be a problem as he knew how to get out unscathed if hostile forces were right in front of him.

However, the frontal attack had been a mere distraction. Before Dazai could react, his mouth was covered with a damp cloth from behind while a needle prickled his neck. After the sting of the needle went away, he started to feel dizzy and wobbly. His legs felt ready to give out underneath him any moment. Quickly afterwards, his vision became blurry, making it harder and harder to focus even on the most minor of things. Seconds later, he passed out, enemies coming at him from all sides.

Chapter End Notes

Confession: My original plot for this chapter was almost completely different. In fact, most of this was meant to be in chapter 3, but then, I discovered a minor contradiction with canon in the story, so I basically spent a week reworking the entire plot and rewriting. I stayed up until 4:30 AM to write this and I regret nothing.

Fun facts about this chapter:
This chapter was actually split into two since the full chapter would have been like 14000+ words long and I did not want to put you lovelies through that so early on.

If I recall correctly, in a chapter of BSD Wan, we see the Port Mafia sleeping in one room. Everyone sleeps like a normal person, and then, there is Chuuya splattered everywhere. Now you know the inspiration behind Chuuya being a messy sleeper in this story.
There is one very important thing I must mention before you begin, and that is the **TRIGGER WARNING**. This chapter includes implied/referenced torture, implied/referenced past self-harm, implied/referenced past sexual abuse and a sexual assault attempt. It is nothing explicit, though it is still there. Scroll down to the line break to avoid the bulk of it, but keep in mind it will still be mentioned in the second half. Feel free to skip to the next chapter if you want to. Honestly, I was debating whether to even incorporate them into the story, but they fit with the plot, so I went for it. You have been warned.

When Dazai woke up, he was in a cold unfamiliar place. A cell or basement of sorts? Maybe it was both. It was hard to tell in the pure darkness. His hands were chained to the wall behind him and his legs were shackled to the floor. Due to the drugs, his head felt heavy, but his mind was not cloudy enough to prevent him from assessing his situation and thinking of how to mitigate it.

Most importantly, he was not alone. Four men who must have belonged to the GSS were outside the room. Having taken notice when he regained his consciousness, they entered the room.

‘Good evening.’ A tall stocky middle-aged man was the first to open his mouth. The other three members lagged behind as if waiting for his lead. ‘Here’s how this is gonna’ go, kid. If you cooperate, you’ll be out of here unhurt in no time. If you keep quiet, you won’t get out unscathed.’

‘Ooh, this is getting exciting,’ Dazai thought, not bothering to repress the smile creeping up on his lips. ‘Maybe joining the mafia is worth it in the end.’ Butterflies fluttered around in his stomach in excitement at the thrill of being in a potential life or death situation. Life bored him to death, but perhaps this was not that awful if it could alleviate his boredom. The prospect of dying in the process only amplified the sensation.

Faced with silence, the man switched his tactics. ‘Let’s go to the interrogation room,’ he motioned to the others, who unlocked his cuffs after restraining him with rope.

Resorting to torture already? How bizarre. Either he had no patience or he really wanted to take out his frustrations on a mafioso after the Port Mafia’s attack. Even so, he did not exactly seem like the impatient or angry type. Odd.

That did not matter right now, though. Dazai had to find a way out. He did not wish to go through the pain of torture. Torture would not work against him as his pain threshold was ridiculously high, but that did not make it any more pleasant.

In an instant, he scanned his surroundings. The group was walking on a dim corridor at a rapid pace. The only man who had spoken so far was holding on to him with his gun aimed at his head. His hold was so feeble that even Dazai would be able to shake it off. A second man was behind him, watching him so that the other could focus on shooting. The others were in front of him, blocking his path and making it impossible to get past one of them without both of them chasing after him. He could attempt to duck, take the ones behind him by surprise with a kick, then run as
fast as his legs could take him. Indeed, he did not know where to go, but if he could succeed in hiding for a while, he had a chance. Had he been a good fighter or had he had an ability useful for combat purposes like Chuuya, he could have got out of this with no hassle. Alas, physical combat was his weakness, so the probability of him executing that plan successfully were very low.

Sadly, given how narrow and linear the corridor was, finding a place to hide or losing them around a corner was unlikely. So far, he had not seen any stairs, ladders, secret doors or anything except for cells, meaning that the route from the cells to the interrogation room was a straight line going deeper into the building rather than closer to the exit. Even if he ran the other way, he could bet that there were guards at the exit or upstairs. There was no way he could fight his way out. If he tried to run, they would shoot his kneecaps before he got far enough if they had an ounce of a brain. The only method to persuade them to show him the location of the exit was to steal a gun and threaten them with it, which was too difficult to pull off in the little time he had. No matter what plan he came up with, it was too risky. He could not get away from this.

For now, he would endure the unpleasant experience that was about to follow so that he could flee after they left. Lock picking came so naturally to him that he could without a shadow of a doubt get out of the chains they would shackle him to. He would have to make sure to steal his cell keys from whoever possessed them somewhere along the way.

Upon reaching the interrogation room, Dazai was placed on a table with restraints on his limbs. The room was just as dark and cold as the cell. Nearby, there were various instruments, from knives and whips to breast rippers and picanas. Lighters could also be found in the room. The interrogation had not even begun yet and Dazai was already looking forward to its end.

‘Is this your secret dungeon?’ Dazai inquired jauntily. ‘You sure are into some niche stuff!’

The leader sighed. ‘Quit your bullshit and tell us what you know before we make you go through hell, boy.’ So, he had moved Dazai to the torture chamber to intimidate him into revealing information without lifting a finger. Not a bad tactic.

‘Well, I know that the sky is blue because molecules in the air scatter blue light from the sun more than they scatter red light as it travels in shorter, smaller waves –’

The man struck him with his gun and aimed the gun at his chest. ‘Don’t mess with us, brat. You know exactly what I’m talking about.’

‘Oh? What would that be?’ Dazai asked with pretend ignorance.

‘Some of our men died because of you and the King of Sheep today.’

Ah, so this is what this was about. ‘Not my fault they attacked us first! Maybe if they wanted to live, they would’ve known better than to attack my partner of all people.’

‘Partner?’

Dazai just laughed. He was not lying; Chuuya was his partner for this case. It would not hurt to overstate their relationship in order to lead the GSS astray a bit. ‘Oh, didn’t you know? He’s my partner. And if my calculations are correct, you’ll have to face him soon enough if you don’t let me go.’ He did not truly expect Chuuya to rescue him; instead, he was relying on his own wits to get him out as soon as the GSS let their guard down. Nonetheless, considering the high chance that they will come into contact with the Sheep in the near future, convincing them that Chuuya betrayed the Sheep for the Port Mafia would serve to further his mission. Even if they did not discuss with the Sheep about this, providing them misinformation so that they would come to the
wrong conclusion about Chuuya’s affiliation could only be beneficial for the mafia.

‘What do you mean?’ the ringleader asked with a tone of urgency in his voice, his eyes widening slightly. ‘You better tell us right now before I blow your brains out!'

A smug smirk appeared on Dazai’s face, his eyes devoid of light. ‘Both you and I know you aren’t going to shoot me. The GSS was decimated literally a few hours ago. You’re still dealing with the aftermath and trying to pick up the shards of your organisation; in other words, you’re in no position to fight. By killing a member of the Port Mafia, it would be like baiting the mafia to come back for more, and you wouldn’t be able to withstand a second attack as you are now. Considering whom I’m partnered with, you wouldn’t choose to kill me of all the people in the mafia, since Chuuya would retaliate ten times harder, just like he did with the Sheep. What a pity… Dying instantly to a bullet to the head would’ve made me genuinely happy.’

Ignoring his outlandish shenanigans, all of the GSS members strolled towards the table which the tools were situated on. Each of them latched on to a different tool. Without waiting, they crossed the distance between them and Dazai and got to work.

The pain was unimaginable. Every time his skin was hit, torn, burnt or electrocuted, Dazai had to suppress tears from coming into his eyes. Half the time, he was in too much agony to even hear the questions they were asking. He put on a brave face, although behind the surface, the excruciating urge to scream and run away wanted to gush out. Even so, he could not allow a single sound to escape due to acknowledging that resistance will only provoke his assailants further and result in worse treatment as they would become hopeful that they could make him talk. If he was going to suffer, he wanted to limit the amount of pain he was going to go through, and while silence seemed counter-intuitive, he reasoned that the reality was the opposite. As long as he said nothing, he would be kept alive, which would give him time to think up an escape. If he spoke or cried out in pain, they would continue until he reached his limit. The torture was bound to increase in severity either way, but were it ineffective, they would give up eventually.

All throughout, he had kept his mouth shut without reacting, even if he had to bite his tongue several times to muffle sobs and screams. Years of inefficient self-harm and failed suicide attempts had taught Dazai to hate pain, and struggling would only serve to generate more of that.

Dazai did not know how long it took until they finished. After a while, the GSS member who seemed to be the boss among them stopped suddenly and signalled for the others to follow him. Dazai took that moment to breathe and harden his heart in preparation for whatever other worse things they had in mind. From what Dazai had heard about torture in the underworld from Mori, it seemed that they went easy on him. Who knows, perhaps the fact that they were torturing a scrawny teenager did not sit right with their conscience. However, that was quite unlikely, so Dazai reasoned that they interrupted their session to plan how to make him give in. In order to find out what they had in store for him, he listened in to their conversation, which proved extremely difficult since they were quite a distance away.

‘This isn’t going anywhere,’ the man who had gestured towards the others to come with him said. ‘He’s a tough one, torture isn’t gonna’ make him talk.’

‘Do you have any better ideas?’ one of the other men asked.

‘I do,’ he declared. ‘We could make him go crazy from starvation and isolation.’ Dazai put on a smug smile. He was Dazai, starvation and isolation were nothing new to him, not to mention that he was already crazy anyway. If that was their plan, then he certainly had time to flee. ‘If that’s not enough, we add in torture again. Most people become much more willing to blab once their basic needs aren’t met, let alone if they have to put up with torture as well.’
'But won’t that give the mafia time to search for him?’ another GSS member stated.

‘Exactly,’ the second speaker agreed. ‘We’re running on a tight schedule and we wouldn’t be able to handle another attack from the Port Mafia currently. We can’t risk it.’

‘Well, do you have any outstanding proposals, then?’ the ringleader spat in an exasperated tone. It seems that he was the type who did not like having his authority questioned. Even if someone did have an objection, they would not say it out loud when they heard how he delivered that line. ‘I propose we leave it at that for today and try again tomorrow once he’s worn out a bit.’

‘I agree,’ a fourth voice chimed in.

‘…Roger,’ the men who disagreed with the decision responded.

‘Alright. I’ll leave you two to stand guard. Make sure the brat doesn’t try anything.’

Dazai received some light medical treatment for his wounds before being taken back to his cell. It was not anywhere near enough, but it was better than nothing. Once he was in his cell, the pair who wanted to continue remained in front of it to ensure he did not escape.

An unknown amount of time passed, the two guards staring intently at him all along. They seemed like they were waiting for something. Dazai was perturbed by what could possibly have made them glance at him in that manner. Indeed, they were meant to watch him, but they resembled ravenous predators more than watchmen. He could make this work in his favour by making the one with the keys come to him and steal them before he noticed, then depart under the cover of the night.

The man whom Dazai identified as the one with the key to his cell got a call. ‘The coast is clear,’ he told the other while taking the keys out of his pocket and opening the padlock on the iron bars. The second man, who was slightly taller, followed him into the cramped space, staying marginally closer to the exit to stop Dazai from darting away if he somehow got out of the chains.

‘Eh, have you finally come to your senses and realised keeping me here any longer is useless? My, you’re smarter than I thought!’ Dazai said in mock admiration.

‘In your dreams, kid.’ The first man to enter the room sent him a malevolent grin. ‘Instead, we’ve come up with a better way to make you blab. I doubt even you’ll hold up once we’re done with you.’

Dazai kept his expression neutral so as not to divulge his inner turmoil. He did not like where this was going. If they were referring to what he believed they were, then he was not sure he could handle it. Not again. ‘Aren’t you disobeying your superior’s orders? You sure you want me telling him that when he comes by tomorrow?’ Dazai forced a snicker to mimic confidence.

Both men unfastened their belts. It was a warning sign.

‘I’m positive the captain will be over the moon when he hears we got what we needed from you earlier than expected. He can forgive us for a tad bit of insubordination if it’s justified.’

Dazai stuck his tongue out at them. ‘Only if you succeed, which you won’t.’

‘How about you start talking? What are the Port Mafia’s aims and what were you doing with the King of Sheep?’ the taller man enquired.

‘Geez, can’t a guy go out for a stroll with his partner? We saw an explosion and went to check it out,’ Dazai attempted to diffuse the situation. In reality, he was struggling to maintain his usual
poise, not wanting to reveal his current mental state to the people in front of him.

A belt slapped him over the face. ‘That’s not everything. You’re not fooling anyone.’

‘It’s the truth.’ Technically, it was. He was walking towards a destination with the redhead when they spotted an explosion and ran there. After all, he never claimed that he told them the full story.

‘Hurry up and answer our questions before you learn what being fucked dry feels like.’

Those words felt like a punch to the gut. His heart rate went up in an instant, anxiety beginning to overtake his brain. Breathing became a challenge in itself. He cursed mentally, being unwilling to either bear more pain or disclose his knowledge. The unpleasant flashbacks playing in his head were not helping either. Based on their positions, he could not release his restraints and run away within a realistic time frame. In other words, he was stuck.

He was accustomed to being used in every single possible manner and there was no way out, so for now… he had no choice but to comply. He detached himself from the situation and made up his resolve to let things happen. That was the most rational decision. It was definitely not the prettiest, although he knew they would probably not murder him, so it was the least painful variant. Besides, he did not wish for anyone to glimpse at the truth behind his masks and ascertain what it took to make him lose his cool and destroy him. In resisting, he would be admitting that such acts could take a toll on him, which would encourage them to repeat the event in their pursuit for information. No matter what, he was not going to let them get the satisfaction of breaking him. Especially not this way.

No response. Seeing his silence as a sign that Dazai needed more incentive to sell out the mafia, the man stepped towards him and pushed him against the wall. One hand held him tightly into place while another began to tug at Dazai’s trousers.

That was when the unexpected occurred.

Their captain emerged from the dark hallway abruptly and put the GSS member closer to the door into a chokehold until he passed out. When the other one turned around, he shot him using the same type of pistol model as the Port Mafia before emptying a round into the unconscious man as well.

Quickly, he stole the keys to the chains from his deceased subordinates with gloved hands so as not to leave behind evidence, then proceeded to free Dazai.

‘Thanks for coming to save me so soon!’ Dazai said cheerfully. He put his regular farcical eccentric mask back on, seeking to hide his relief and that his heart was beating so hard that it could jump out of his chest any moment. Mori discovering the extent to which what he had just gone through affected him would have been bad news, after all. ‘I got to say, I suspected Mori must have had a spy in the GSS, but I wasn’t betting on them being someone in as high position as you.’

The mafia’s spy in the GSS was stunned. He had noticed that the boy was sharp when he was questioning him, but he did not foresee that he would catch on so early. ‘…When did you work it out?’

‘I thought it was weird that the GSS would capture a member of the Port Mafia while they’re still recovering after a battle to begin with. My suspicions started when you jumped straight into torture. Looking back on it, your grip on me was so weak that I recognise you might have been trying to give me a chance to fight my way out, although I’m not a good enough fighter for that, so that didn’t happen. As things went, I didn’t figure you out until the moment you asked me about
my partnership with Chuuya. You were faking panic; in reality, you were glad that the factor which made the Sheep a threat was neutralised by being incorporated into the mafia. A hardened veteran like you is unlikely to have been as phased by that as you were. Well done for pretending, though; you didn’t fool me, but you definitely fooled your subordinates.’

‘Thank you,’ the man replied, being at a loss for words. Just who was this boy? He had to be someone important for the boss of the Port Mafia to risk compromising his spy for him, but listening to him in person, it felt as if there was more to it than that. Oh, well, it was none of his business anyway. His role was to bust the boy out and take him to the meeting point, where a car will be waiting for him, not to question orders.

And so, the captain led Dazai to the meeting point before setting off. Dazai received proper treatment at a Port Mafia clinic and headed home with nothing but his sombre thoughts and memories that he would rather forget for company.

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Dazai was late.

Later than yesterday, anyhow. Nine hours ago, after playing games at the arcade and bumping into the Sheep, the pair separated and went their own ways. It was almost midnight already. Chuuya did not know how much time a verbal report took on average, but he was willing to bet it did not take this long.

Perhaps Dazai was up to some shady business or flung himself into a river. Both options were fine with Chuuya as long as his friends were safe. What did he care what the suicidal maniac was up to anyway? He did not. He was simply sick of being watched in the living room by the old man.

Truth to be told, Hirotsu was not horrible company. He was certainly less irritating than the bandaged freak. They were playing card games, which Chuuya lost at miserably every time. It was quite fun, albeit it was nowhere near as fun as hanging out with the Sheep. However, his energy was drained. Sleep was calling for him, only to serve as a reminder that he could not go to sleep right now since he did not want a potentially creepy old man to watch him while he slept. Just no. Taking a shower and changing into the dog onesie while the old man was in the living room had already been uncomfortable enough.

The noise of keys rattling at the front door resounded in the living room. Thank God, Dazai was finally back, and Chuuya could finally sleep!

Or so he thought. The moment he laid his eyes upon Dazai, something felt… off. It was just the tiniest shift in atmosphere, but Chuuya had always been able to sense such changes subconsciously. Maybe he got attacked on the way back? He was covered in more bandages than before, so it was plausible.

Seeing Dazai entering the flat, Hirotsu got up to hand him the spare keys he had used to get in and sauntered to the exit. ‘Now that Dazai has returned, I shall take my leave.’

‘Bye, old man,’ Chuuya waved.

‘Thank you for staying with Chuuya, Hirotsu.’ Dazai’s tone was mechanic, like a robot programmed to repeat the same phrase. He seemed even more dead inside than he had over the past days. Chuuya did not like that. ‘Goodnight.’
‘Goodnight.’ Hirotsu bowed and exited the flat, leaving the two teenagers alone.

‘What took you so damn long?’ Chuuya bit back the urge to insult Dazai, not understanding why he felt as though he should not insult him at that moment.

‘I was enjoying a lovely evening drinking with a gorgeous lady! Until she slapped me and I fell down some stairs which just happened to be next to me when she did,’ Dazai replied with an artificial cheery smile, speaking at a faster pace than beforehand. That set off an alarm in Chuuya’s head. If nothing out of the ordinary happened, Dazai would have spoken at his regular pace in an even tone. When people try to hide something or lie, they tend to talk faster due to anxiety and panic. It was such a slight difference that Chuuya would have shrugged it off under most other circumstances, but Dazai was also late as hell, wrapped in more bandages than before, seemed weird from the moment he stepped into the flat and dodged the question outright. Chuuya was not gullible enough to believe all the extra bandages were due to falling down the stairs. Had Dazai been in a right state of mind, he would have come up with a credible excuse rather than deflect the question. Five red flags were already into the picture and he had only been in the room for a minute.

Noticing that Dazai was not eager to talk, Chuuya settled on coming up with something to distract him. ‘Have you had dinner?’ He had no idea why he wanted to do something for him, not that he did it consciously. It was just how he was, he reasoned, blaming it on his years of looking after the Sheep.

‘No.’ Chuuya believed it was impossible to sound even more dead inside than Dazai sounded when they met, but now, he was proven wrong. Yesterday’s Dazai was positively energetic in comparison with his current mood. Hearing him like that sealed the deal: Chuuya was going to give the boy a break for the night. Just for tonight. That did not mean they were not enemies anymore, for they were, but a few hours of not blowing up at him should be doable. Hopefully. With how annoying Dazai was, he was not sure that he would succeed, though Dazai appeared less likely to tease him in his current state, which was a decent start for a truce for the night.

Dazai studied Chuuya’s face in an attempt to guess what thoughts were flying through his mind. The fact that he asked Dazai if he had had dinner was strange in itself (he had not bothered to ask anything of that sort the day before), but what was even more peculiar was that he looked… worried? No; Dazai could have sworn that was what his body language suggested, albeit that emotion would not make sense considering their situation and rocky relationship. Perhaps the drugs had messed with his brain more than he initially thought, to the point that it affected his capacity to read people. By now, he thought they would be out of his system, but maybe he was wrong (which was not an option). Was Chuuya uncomfortable or waiting to be told the real reason why Dazai took so long to return?

‘What’s your favourite food?’ If Chuuya knew two things about food, it was that food made people happy and that his cooking was tasty, so making dinner was acceptable enough if he wanted to help somehow. In addition, Dazai needed to eat so he could function properly on their mission, so it was in Chuuya’s best interests as well to make sure he ate something.

The question ended Dazai’s train of thought. This situation was becoming more and more mystifying. Was Chuuya planning on poisoning him or why did he need to know that? Oh, well, either way, poison was not such a horrible way to go. Deciding that answering his question would not hurt, he relinquished that information. ‘Crab.’

‘Alright, I’m off to make dinner, then.’

‘I’m not hungry.’ He had never felt hunger and only ate enough to subsist when he remembered,
not that Chuuya needed to know that.

‘I don’t care, you need to eat.’ Having observed that the other boy was underweight, he refused to take no for an answer. Despite their height difference, he would not have been surprised if he weighed more than Dazai.

Disregarding Dazai’s words, Chuuya looked through the kitchen to see if he had everything necessary to cook a crab dish. He and Hirotsu had stopped by the supermarket earlier, so he had a good idea of where everything was, but he still had to check if Dazai owned utensils and the other ingredients that he needed.

Luckily, there were enough ingredients to prepare a decent dinner. Chuuya decided to cook kani-meshi. Kani-meshi is a hearty meal, which was exactly the type of dish Chuuya believed to be suitable for someone as skinny as Dazai, and the single time Chuuya made it, everyone in the Sheep loved it, so he felt confident picking this for their dinner tonight.

While Chuuya made the dish, Dazai stood on one of the chairs at the dining table, not letting him out of sight as ordered.

Ugh. Something like that just had to happen at the worst moment, did it not? Dazai had hoped that Chuuya was not observant enough to detect anything, but Chuuya was acting a bit odd. Dazai was in bad spirits after having to endure a day with the shrimp (although he had to admit, it had not been that horrible, not when compared to what went on without him around). Now, the emptiness inside of him was engulfing him like a never-ending and inescapable abyss, and the drugs had worn off entirely, so the physical and mental pain was too strong to be ignored.

With the scars of the past coming back to plague him as a result of the time he spent with the GSS, he became disgusted by himself. He wanted nothing more than to get rid of the filth, assuming he even could, and scrap at his skin until it bled. Yes, the GSS members had not managed to have their way with him, but they got too close to that for comfort. He wanted to jump off a bridge, hang himself or drown. That was what he planned on doing initially, but then, Mori secured him a ride home which included hidden cameras in the car so that his attempts would be foiled instantaneously. How he hated that Mori could read him and predict what he was going to do no matter the situation… Honestly, he would not have minded it even if he picked up old habits from before he decided that he hated pain and bled to death.

Most of all, he hated how disturbingly familiar the numbness inside of him was. Normal people might have cried, but tonight simply made him remember how much he wanted to die and how meaningless life was. Sometimes, he could distract himself from wallowing in his inner void, though every time he recalled the incidents, the abyss would stare back at him immediately afterwards.

And then, there was the other teenager preparing their dinner. What had got into him? Yesterday, he had not insisted on making dinner, only to turn the page and contradict himself the next day. Dazai discerned that Chuuya’s expression was softer, carrying an almost solicitous attentiveness, and his words were more carefully chosen, as if he was biting back his tongue so as not to upset Dazai. From time to time, he switched his gaze to Dazai, almost like he was trying to examine his own expression and pondering on ideas for what to do next. Was he monitoring Dazai’s mental state and trying to comfort him or something? How ludicrous that would be! It was so illogical that he pushed that very thought away. There had to be some ulterior motive in all of this.

‘You know, you don’t have to stay with me while I cook,’ Chuuya said out of the blue. Dazai had not realised that he had been staring at Chuuya without blinking for a while until then. ‘I’m not gonna’ flee and I can see you’re not gonna’ help, so feel free to do what you want.’
Dazai perceived this as his opportunity to wash away the impurity enveloping his skin. Surely, with the cameras in his flat, the guards outside and Chuuya concentrating on a task, it would not be a problem if he let him out of sight for a bit. Above all, he was desperate to feel clean again. He could never feel truly clean again, but if he took a shower, he could delude himself into falsely believing that he was not tainted and damaged beyond repair for some time. ‘I’m going to take a shower. There are guards outside, so don’t try anything unless you want to get tased or tranquilised.’

‘Yeah, whatever. Don’t drown in the shower.’

‘That would take too long!’ Dazai had ruminated on the feasibility of a shower suicide before, but no matter how he looked at it, it was impractical and time-consuming. And so, Dazai went to shower while Chuuya was finishing up the meal.

Dazai took an unordinarily long shower. His recent wounds hurt too much for him to move fast. Had a certain Sheep not been in his kitchen, under what was allegedly his watch, he would probably have spent at least three hours in there. Regrettably, he had to get back as soon as possible so as to thwart Chuuya’s attempts to construe his actions in an incriminating manner. He secretly hoped that Chuuya found the poison in his cupboard and put it in the meal to give him the death which he craved so much that it was agonising.

When he got out of the shower, Chuuya was waiting at the kitchen table, two bowls on parallel sides of the table with chopsticks and teacups next to them. A teapot and sugar cubes were on the table within reach of the bowls.

‘You didn’t have to,’ Dazai parroted his own sentence from the previous night as he took a seat parallel to Chuuya.

‘You didn’t have to buy me new clothes for my stay here either, but here we are,’ Chuuya pointed out. ‘Now shut up and enjoy the food before it gets cold.’

Chuuya poured them each a cup of black tea. He put one sugar cube in his own and Dazai helped himself to a few sugar cubes. Raising an eyebrow, Chuuya wondered if Dazai was purposefully trying to give himself diabetes, because a small cup of tea did not need that many sugar cubes.

They both dug in. Dazai would rather die than be heard saying it out loud (or exist in general), but the kani-meshi smelled like Heaven and was delicious. It was better than any meal he had had in a while. His eyes started to light up involuntarily and he found himself eating quicker than he would have expected with his commonly non-existent appetite. A minor part of him wanted to taste this again and see what other things Chuuya can cook. He would have to note that down and compel Chuuya to cook for him more often after he forced him into the mafia.

Chuuya was not particularly hungry as he had already had dinner, and even had he been, he would have been too fixated on Dazai to enjoy the meal. He pretended to focus on eating while shooting Dazai furtive glances whenever he was too preoccupied with the food to see him. The kani-meshi seemed to be helping a little and despite Dazai claiming not to be starving, he did not reflect that in his actions. Chuuya could not stop a small smile from appearing on his face upon seeing Dazai slowly brightening up. He covered his smile up with food and tea so Dazai would not notice, though the other boy noticed regardless. Cheering people up with his cooking always made him proud of himself.

They finished the meal in peace, neither of them having uttered a word over the course of it. Dazai could not bring himself to eat more than half, albeit that was more than he normally ate. Chuuya looked concerned once again, silently wondering if his cooking had not been up to par. Even
though he was a bit saddened by that thought, he shrugged it off, cleared the table and proceeded to do the dishes.

‘You would be such a perfect housewife,’ Dazai affirmed with a mocking shit-eating grin from the chair he sat on while they ate in the kitchen, apparently having nothing better to do than to stare at Chuuya 24/7 as if he would run away the second he took his eyes off him. Good to know the jerk was feeling better.

‘Say something like that again and I’ll smash this bowl on your head.’

‘That wouldn’t be enough to kill me.’

‘Then, I’ll stab you repeatedly with the shards, shove them down your throat and encrust them into your skin.’

‘You’re no fun!’ Dazai pouted like a little kid. ‘Maybe you’d have a girlfriend if you weren’t so violent…’

‘Why do you care so much about that? Seriously, what the fuck?’

‘I don’t!’ Dazai was just trying to tease him to make him flustered. Sure, knowing whether Chuuya had a lover in the Sheep or not was relevant information which he could use against him, but above all, he had discovered that annoying Chuuya was hilarious, and he was going to keep doing it to see his entertaining reactions.

‘Don’t bring it up if that’s the case!’

Thankfully, the wash-up was complete in mere minutes, so Dazai did not have the chance to taunt him further. Chuuya had to remind himself that Dazai might not have been in the best mental state at that moment to pacify himself. He still had to confront Dazai about the issue at hand, so he chose to bring it up, having a backup plan to fall back on when Dazai could not take any more prodding. Chuuya determined that tackling the issue all at once was unlikely to be effective, hence why he sandwiched the questioning in-between two breather sessions. Make him comfortable to eschew a breakdown and make him more open to questions, interrogate him and calm him down. It was as good a plan as he could come up with in the short time that he had to devise it. It was time for phase two.

Chuuya sat down across from Dazai so he could have a better view of his reactions and adapt his approach as the situation called. With Dazai, beating around the bush was bound to get evasive responses exclusively, so he skipped the waffling and went straight to the intended topic. ‘Listen, I can tell you’re not okay.’

Dazai was taken aback. He had not had the time to prepare for this, which was precisely the reason why Chuuya did not give him a warning before beginning the touchy conversation. Mild panic started to cloud his brain. Oh, no, do not, please, for the love of God or Satan or whatever powers there are out there –

‘You don’t have to tell me what happened, but I know you’re shaken up right now.’ Damn, Chuuya was more observant than he gave him credit for. ‘And I don’t think it’s just because of the extra bandages.’

‘What are you talking about, midget?’ Dazai attempted to bring some playfulness in his voice with modest results. He did not sound as genuine as he did while Chuuya was doing the dishes. ‘I’m perfectly fine. Did you hit your head while I was gone?’
Chuuya did not retort to the insult. To him, it was evident that Dazai was purposefully trying to wind him up to make him forget his unsettling behaviour and drop it. It did help that he was less subtle than before due to being taken by surprise. ‘The joke’s on you, Dazai. I’m not falling for that shit,’ he thought.

‘Look, I’m not a fucking moron, don’t treat me like one. It’s obvious that you love to think you’re smarter than everyone else or whatever, but that doesn’t mean I’m too much of an idiot to see right through your bullshit.’

This was bad. Very bad. No one had ever confronted him about not being okay because no one had ever cared, so he had no idea how to keep Chuuya off his back. Dazai’s mind was getting closer to going into panic mode. Thanks to his composed demeanour, he had only had a panic attack twice in his life, but he could recall the signs, which he was exhibiting right now. He could hardly think clearly already, he did not need to have to fend off a stubborn ginger in a battle of wits too.

What would make Chuuya drop it? He had a temper, that was for sure. Maybe making him blow up would persuade him to forget it, just like yesterday when he wanted nothing more to do with Dazai after Dazai knowingly pissed him off to test his limits.

‘You’ve known me for what, two days, and you think you can tell what I’m feeling? How presumptuous of you! What do you know, you brat?! Know your place.’ His voice was chilly, full of malice and disconnected. Chuuya identified that as cold anger or nervousness, for it sounded too severe to be Dazai’s usual condescending indifference. Dazai’s intention was to push Chuuya away, but more of his internalised emotions escaped into his tone than he wished. Someone like Chuuya could never claim to understand what he had been through or the perpetual nothingness inside of him.

‘You’re losing your temper and composure. Based on what I’ve seen over those two days, you aren’t the type to do that. If you were truly fine, you wouldn’t have reacted with anger or angst, which is how you’re reacting.’ Dazai opened his mouth to salvage some form of defence, but he was cut off when Chuuya put his hand up to signal him to listen for a bit longer and continued. ‘Once again, I don’t expect you to tell me. I’m just trying to let you know that if you ever want to, you have that option.’

Dazai was stunned. Did the boy in front of him not realise how absurd he sounded? Was he earnestly concerned about the well-being of the guy who roped him into this investigation with his friends’ lives at stake? Logic could not explain that lest he was trying to get closer to Dazai or something. However, that justification was patchy at best; the Sheep were safe, so getting all buddy-buddy with Dazai was not mandatory. Dazai could not fathom why anyone would worry about him, let alone someone he barely knew and with whom he had got off on a rocky start from the get-go. Could it be that Chuuya’s character was simply like that and that he was not operating on an agenda?

‘What a fool,’ Dazai thought to himself. If Chuuya was really such a fool as to allow himself to feel any non-negative emotions even towards an enemy, he could only imagine how much the mafia will work him to the bone and use him, how they will warp that innocence and caring nature to suit their needs until there was nothing left.

As he was now, Chuuya was not a flawless fit for the mafia. Maybe he was going to be moulded into the perfect mafioso at some unknown point in the future, but currently, he was far from that. He was strong, loyal and not afraid to commit crime, but that was as far as his aptness for the mafia went. His personality did not reflect the ideal prospective mafioso otherwise. Everything he did, he did to protect those dear to him, and while the mafia could exploit that for their own advantage,
that betrayed a level of kindness and humaneness that was rare in the Port Mafia. Dazai knew that Chuuya would be put through hell to drive away those remainders of human decency, all for the glory of the mafia. He did not even want to mull over the horrible things that would be imposed upon him by Mori after he joined.

*Mori…*

At that moment, an epiphany struck him. So *that* is what transpired. Dazai being taken out of the GSS’ underground prison after mere hours was too convenient. It was as if he was just put there to prove a point and go. No one would be able to tell that he was kidnapped were he gone for just a few hours, especially not with his suicide attempts and tendency to evaporate into thin air at random. Yet, the double agent came to his rescue as soon as nightfall descended upon the city. In consequence, he could deduce that Mori knew that he was captured from the start, and the only way for him to unearth that information so early was to have been the one behind it. Mori planned for the GSS to capture Dazai in order for Dazai to mislead them about which side of the conflict Chuuya fought on, and by extension, to deceive the Sheep themselves once they shared information with the GSS. Even so, Mori could not allow Dazai to stay with the GSS for too long since he could not get that past Chuuya, hence why he was rescued before the day was over. The whole time, his suffering was just a means to an end in the ongoing Chuuya recruitment campaign. How utterly evil.

Dazai cut his thoughts off, swallowing aimlessly to calm himself and regain his voice. He still had to convince Chuuya that everything was just peachy; after all, he could not let him catch a glimpse of the darkness in his blank heart, nor could be permit him to learn anything that could compromise Dazai’s mission.

‘You’re just imagining things,’ he began in the most dismissive and laid-back manner he could muster. ‘Even if by some unlikely sorcery, something happened,’ he continued while emphasising the last four words with disbelief and ridiculousness protruding in his voice, an eye-roll added for effect, ‘why would I even want to tell you anything?’

Chuuya was not tricked by his act. He had already experienced the good old ‘trick the other person into thinking they’re being crazy and unreasonable by making their words seem preposterous so that they believe any stupid crap you say when they don’t want to tell you something’ tactic. The moment Dazai put effort into that technique was the moment he conceded that Chuuya was correct. ‘So, you admit something happened. Gaslighting won’t work on me, you know.’

Dazai’s pupils widened due to nervousness. He had to get out of this state of affairs somehow. Perhaps he could fabricate a story or say that even though something took place, it did not matter?

Fortunately, he did not have to do anything, for Chuuya stopped it himself. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t pry.’

Dazai could breathe again. He did not realise how nervous he had been until Chuuya soothed him with that phrase.

Chuuya did not take his eyes off Dazai, keeping his full attention on him. He studied every single small shift in stance, position, expression, voice, mannerisms, fidgeting, *everything*. Thanks to that, he did not miss Dazai’s relief when he told him that he will not press him any further. Not wishing to bother him any more for the night, he closed the subject and changed the topic, commencing phase three of his plan.

‘Is there anything that you like?’ Phase three was to do something that he liked together in order to assuage the negative aftershocks of the questioning.
‘Suicide.’ Chuuya facepalmed mentally. How predictable.

‘How about something besides hoping that your languor dreams of death will become reality? Do you have any hobbies?’

‘Video games.’ His responses were succinct and clipped, so Chuuya presumed that while he was still feeling down, he was stable. He could build upon that.

‘Wanna’ play a game together?’

Dazai’s interest was piqued, if the fact that he turned to look at Chuuya was anything to go by. ‘What game?’

‘Any game you want.’

At that moment, Chuuya did not know how much he would regret letting Dazai pick the game. Maybe he should have taken Dazai’s sneer seriously. He only found out when he got his arse whooped at Mario Kart for the next two hours.

‘Stop cheating, you piece of shit!’

‘I’m not cheating,’ Dazai stated with an arrogant smirk. ‘Don’t blame your astonishing lack of skill on me.’

‘That’s a lie and you know it! You must be using some trick! Did you rig the game?’ Thus far, Dazai had beaten him every time. That was statistically very unlikely, so there had to be some kind of catch.

‘I don’t need to rig the game when you’re so awful at it.’

‘Bitch, I will fucking end you!’ Chuuya grabbed Dazai by his shirt, raising his other hand up in a fist.

Dazai merely laughed in response. His laugh was airy, jovial and most importantly, authentic, as if he had not walked into the house a mess three hours prior. It was nothing like the fake, devious or sinister laughs Chuuya had heard from him before. When he laughed like that, it was as if he was just another immature teenager, not an impassive shell suffering from an incurable case of arsehattery. Hearing that laugh disarmed Chuuya, who released him and jerked his hand back as if he had touched something hot.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Dazai said, implying a hidden threat. Ah, so the suicidal maniac misunderstood the situation, incorrectly believing that Chuuya had let him go because the laugh made him remember that he could not lay a finger on him due to having to solve the case first. That worked out impeccably for Chuuya, who did not wish to risk setting him off again by correcting his assumption.

The duo went to sleep shortly afterwards, neither of them acting awkward about it anymore. Unlike the previous night, Chuuya did not lie down as far as possible from Dazai. Dazai expected the typical nightmares to come, but once again, they did not.
I AM SO SORRY. On the bright side, in the next chapter, we will finally wrap up
Fifteen and move on with the plot!

Fun facts about this chapter:
Kani-meshi is a crab and rice dish.
In the light novel about the origins of the ADA, Dazai’s regular order at the café is
stated to be black tea with a few sugar cubes. That is why they are drinking black tea
and why Dazai put a lot of sugar in his tea.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hi! There is going to be a bit of French in this chapter. The translations are in the end notes. Whenever a foreign language is used over the course of the story (which will not be that often), you will find the translations in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After having breakfast (courtesy of Chuuya), they went to talk to Randou again. It had been an awkward meal, Dazai not wanting to chat to Chuuya with the memory of last night looming over him. Yes, he was feeling better, and as much as he disliked admitting it, Chuuya did help, but he still felt like he was on the brink of a meltdown. Food and games could not heal the wounds in his heart and fill in the void he felt inside of him that easily. Since Chuuya managed to see through him, he was on guard and decided avoiding him was the best course of action.

Therefore, they separated upon leaving the flat, Chuuya being put under Hirotsu’s supervision once more. Dazai guised it as him giving Chuuya time to apprehend the culprit, though he knew that he would be the first to make the announcement as he had scheduled the party preparations with Randou while Chuuya would have to figure out where Randou was in the first place.

And that is precisely what occurred. The most surprising thing about the ordeal was just how well he and Chuuya worked together, as if they were cogs in a well-oiled machine. In fact, at times, Dazai got the impression that Chuuya could read his mind and keep up with him, which was a feat no one except for Mori had ever accomplished before. The thought that someone might be able to understand him, even a little bit, made Dazai feel an atypical sense of elation that he had only felt at the thought of dying over the past few years.

During the fight, Chuuya amazed him more than he could have imagined. Not only was he powerful, honourable, good at reading the situation and amazing at teamwork even without much information to go by, he was also determined to keep going and full of life, like an everlasting fire. Unlike Dazai, he was set on living as a human despite the vicious god sealed inside of him. That made Chuuya fascinating, for in spite of not being completely human, he behaved more like a human than anyone else he had ever met and had an unparallelled will to live as a human rather than as a monster. Even though Dazai had yet to find a purpose in life, Chuuya had persuaded him to live, if only for a while longer.

‘How long are you gonna’ make me wait for a response, Dazai?’ Chuuya asked out of a sudden.

They were currently in a car, heading towards headquarters from the clinic they had been treated at in order to report to Mori. Dazai had been too caught up in his thoughts once the fight ended to hear whatever Chuuya had been barking about. ‘I wasn’t paying attention.’

‘No shit, Sherlock,’ Chuuya deadpanned. ‘I asked you to let me know if Rimbaud gets a grave and where it will be.’ Interestingly enough, Chuuya’s accent changed when he uttered the French name with flawless pronunciation. He sounded like a native. Did Chuuya speak French somehow?

‘Wait, you speak French?’ Dazai asked, an expression of mild wonder on his visage.
Chuuya turned to look at him, eyes widening in surprise. ‘...Yes?’

How intriguing. Perhaps Chuuya speaking French had to do with his enigmatic past? ‘Je parle français aussi. Comment as-tu appris le français?’

‘Je n'ai aucune idée, j'ai toujours pu parler français. C’est à ton tour de répondre à ma question maintenant.’

‘Alright. Why would I tell you if Rimbaud gets a grave or not?’

‘You and the mafia are the only ones who will know about that, arsehole,’ Chuuya replied as if he had just said the most obvious thing ever, like ‘People die when they are killed’. ‘That’s why I’m asking you. Please.’ His words turned into a timid whisper at the end while he turned his face away from Dazai and crossed his arms. Was that a blush dusting his cheeks? Dazai’s eye must have been playing tricks on him, for Chuuya was sitting to his right, within better range of his covered eye.

‘Getting emotional, aren’t you?’ Dazai teased with a bemused smile.

‘I just want to pay my respects to him, okay? Everything he did, he did for his comrade. I can’t blame him for that.’

Oh, so Rimbaud’s words earnt the shrimp’s respect and admiration. Dazai’s assessment had been correct: Chuuya was ridiculously humane underneath his hair-trigger temper. So humane that it was foolish.

‘Okay, I’ll inform you if he even gets a grave.’ Dazai thought it was unlikely that Rimbaud would get anything like that, considering that he was a mafia traitor, which meant promising this would not imply any more work for Dazai.

As he replayed the events of the investigation in his mind and pondered on the characteristics Chuuya had exhibited over the course of it in an attempt to judge how to use him in his plans after he joined the Port Mafia, a realisation struck Dazai.

Chuuya was too pure for the mafia.

Yes, he was a violent, impulsive and arrogant prick, but he was also honest, kind, considerate, protective, caring and loyal. Above all, he did not operate on a hidden agenda. He was a free spirit who always stated his intentions and desires unless he had a very good reason not to, and even when that happened, he made it clear and explained himself eventually. In other words, he was raw humanity, like a blank state uncorrupted by this world full of lies, façades and schemes. The more Dazai watched Chuuya, the more he saw the burning light that was radiating from within him despite the darkness surrounding his entire existence, and the more he wanted to bask in his light.

Chuuya shone like a lone firefly in the darkness, and Dazai was drawn to his glow as if he had cast a spell on him.

It was the type of light that he had sought within human nature in order to find a reason to live all along. He had thought that falling into the darkness of the underworld would give him a reason to live, yet it seemed like the opposite was true. And it was Chuuya who made him realise that positive rather than negative phototaxis might actually be the path towards what he was searching for.

If Chuuya joined the Port Mafia, he might end up tarnished beyond recognition. Chuuya was too strong to give in to the mafia’s manipulation completely, but he would undoubtedly have to
compromise some of his traits, like his sincerity, compassion and warmth. Just picturing that sight spawned a dull ache in Dazai’s frozen heart, which he had not thought he was capable of in years.

At that moment, Dazai made up his mind.

He cannot and will not let Chuuya’s fire be corrupted by the Port Mafia.

Even if he had to wage war on the mafia in the process, he would not let them have him. He had no idea how to go about that, but he could categorically come up with something given enough time. The negotiations between the GSS and the Sheep would last a while longer, during which Chuuya would still be among the Sheep, so he knew he could do something to prevent Chuuya from becoming a mafioso in the meantime.

Dazai gazed at the boy next to him, who was chattering away excitedly about how even though he had not received all the answers he had been looking for, he was glad that he uncovered at least one thing about his past and that the investigation was over. Hearing Chuuya’s innocent joy at learning something about his mysterious past was all it took to set his decision in stone.

After reporting to Mori, Chuuya flew back to the Sheep while Dazai went home, where he threw himself on the bed and thought. There were five variants lined up in front of him: completing his mission and making Chuuya join the mafia, letting Chuuya go and returning to the mafia, joining the Sheep with Chuuya, letting Chuuya go while he went into hiding or simply removing themselves from the underworld’s power struggles and going into hiding.

By far the safest pathway was to carry on as normal and make Chuuya join the Port Mafia for real. They would be fighting on the winning side and neither the mafia nor Mori would be an issue. However, as he had already established that he could not let Chuuya fall into the mafia’s grip no matter what, that was out of the question.

That posed a huge problem: Dazai could not stay in the mafia if he failed his mission either. Mori had made that clear the moment he was assigned the task. Sadly, Mori knew Dazai a bit too well for his liking. Had Dazai gone back to the mafia without Chuuya, instead of outright killing him for treason, Mori would probably make him go through unimaginable pain until he could not stand it anymore without ever ordering his death, then repeat it whenever he felt like it. Being a mafioso without Chuuya would have been the stupidest thing he could possibly have done.

But did Dazai really want to leave the Port Mafia?

He agreed to join in hopes that by seeing people who gave in to their urges, unlike the people he had known in his life who hid their real selves, and that by surrounding himself with violence and death, he could see humankind up close and find a reason to live. He would not mind going through some pain in his search. Nevertheless, the reminder of the things he was put through for Mori’s egoistical plan left a sour taste in his mouth. His devotion to the Port Mafia was nowhere near sufficient to put himself through that over and over again. The mafia appeared unfit for a person who disliked pain as much as Dazai. Besides, if Mori could do that to his protégé, he did not even want to think of what Mori would do to Chuuya to shape him into the ideal mafia executive. The possibility that he might discover a purpose in life blinded him to the point that he would probably be able to handle it, but whether the mafia could correspond with his expectations was another question altogether.

So far, the mafia had not been in line with his expectations. Violence and death ran aplenty and the underworld was very fun, but he could not take anyone at face value and he could see no point in all the devastation. At its core, the Port Mafia resembled a caricature of humanity, distorted for selfish desires until all that was human in them was no more. Maybe he just had not been in the
mafia long enough; he could always change his mind if something happened before the Sheep’s betrayal.

Indeed, there had been a few moments when he could catch a glimpse of humankind since he joined the mafia. All of those moments ensued around Chuuya. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that those flashes of humanity came from Chuuya, not from the Port Mafia and mafia work itself. No matter how Dazai looked at it, a God of Destruction’s vessel or not, Chuuya was how a human is supposed to be. If even the physical manifestation of a god could find a reason to live and learn how to be human, then there was a chance that Dazai could, too. Since Chuuya had been the only one who had made him privy to humanity thus far, it could be the case that he could understand humankind and find a valid purpose in life if he stayed around Chuuya, whether they were in the mafia or not. Most of all, now that he had glimpsed the light, he was not sure he could stomach living in the darkness any longer. Dazai could not bring himself to pull Chuuya into the darkness, but having seen the light, he could not return to the darkness either.

With Dazai’s intelligence and Chuuya’s power, they could make the Sheep reach new heights that no one could have dreamt of. Even so, Dazai did not want to associate himself with some annoying brats whom he did not care about. Not to mention that the Sheep would literally be the first place Mori would look for them. Sure, Dazai could blackmail Mori into leaving them alone since they knew he assassinated the former boss, but if one day, Mori’s hold on power in the mafia was so stable that he could get away with outright declaring he murdered the previous boss, they and the Sheep would become targets for Mori. Knowing Mori, were he aware of their whereabouts, he would find a way to pressure them into returning to the mafia anyway, so they would not last long in the Sheep even if they chose them. Besides, there were too many issues within the Sheep and between them and Chuuya for the Sheep to be a safe space for them. If they were both in the Sheep, then the Sheep would come to depend on them both, worsening the situation. That organisation on the whole was a ticking time bomb full of tyke-bombs and he was not in the mood to clean up the imminent mess that would arise from that.

That left going rogue as the only option. There was no safety in numbers in that and it was going to be difficult with the Port Mafia having eyes everywhere, but if anyone could evade Mori’s detection, it was Dazai, and if anyone could destroy entire squads of people sent after him, it was Chuuya. Whether they disappeared together or went their own ways, they were both going to survive.

Over the past year, Mori had overshared a bit too much about how the mafia worked and how far his power reached. Consequently, Dazai knew almost as much about the Port Mafia’s most hidden secrets as the boss himself, even though he had technically joined mere days prior. Possessing that kind of knowledge made him a threat who could ruin the mafia if he spoke to the right people. While this could make him become the most valuable informant in the underworld, that would draw too much attention and provide incentive for Mori to dispose of him. Lying low without interfering with the underworld at all was the wisest course of action.

With his next step decided, it was time to plot how on Earth he will actually pull this off without dying a torturous death. There were plenty of things that could go wrong and he had to account for all of them, as well as for Chuuya himself.

First things first, Chuuya was not keen on joining the Port Mafia. He would do it to save the Sheep, but he had no reason to do it otherwise. In fact, he hated the mafia for the damage it did to the city under the old boss. Presented with the opportunity to avoid being pulled into the mafia, he would most likely accept it. If he did not hate Dazai now, he would definitely hate him after the Sheep’s betrayal, though, which could throw a spanner in the works. If he explained the situation to him, he might be willing to cooperate, if only for a night so he could drag him away from the mafia’s
Dazai was gambling on Chuuya hating the mafia and the thought of joining it more than he hated him, albeit he was almost sure that Chuuya would play along with his plan even if he hated Dazai more than the mafia. In case Chuuya refused, then Dazai would respect his choice and let him be, as much as he would dislike seeing that. He was going to make sure that he did not leave any traces that could point towards him trying to foil his mission on purpose, just in the unlikely case that Chuuya truly wanted to join the Port Mafia.

There were two things that could convince Chuuya to pick the Port Mafia: Arahabaki and the Sheep. Dazai had recently been announced that the mafia salvaged all the documents about Arahabaki from Rimbaud’s place before throwing everything else in the ocean. Of course, his instructions said to lie that there was no such thing if Chuuya asked. Dazai presumed he had to lie for some shady thing Mori intended to do in order to coerce Chuuya to become the perfect mafioso. Without the files, Chuuya would have no motivation to really immerse himself into the Port Mafia. Stealing the files was not exactly possible since it would give away his implication in Chuuya’s disappearance; only a select few knew about the files, after all.

Fortunately, there was a way around that. ‘Borrowing’ and returning the files after he copied them, but before anyone figured out that they were missing was not impossible to execute. Chuuya would not believe him if he simply told him the content of the files, even though Dazai had a photographic memory, meaning that if he wanted Chuuya to leave the mafia behind with no regard for the files, he needed physical proof of their contents. He could not borrow the files too soon or too late, though; if he went for them right away, that would give Mori time to work out what he was planning, although if he suspiciously did that on the date of the Sheep’s betrayal, it would be like telling Mori that he was running away with Chuuya. Perhaps accomplishing that part of his plan two or three days before the betrayal would work. In that time period, there was not enough time for Mori to discover his plot and search his flat for evidence, though it was not necessarily too ‘in your face’ either. Besides, there was no guarantee that Mori would even tell Chuuya about the files on the day he joined. Dazai decided to copy the files just in case he did.

As for the Sheep, Dazai had already figured out what Mori’s intention with the Sheep was. Chuuya would stay in the mafia to protect the Sheep, fearing for their safety if he rebelled against the Port Mafia. There was one fact that Chuuya was unaware of, however. Regardless of what Chuuya did, the Sheep would wind up dead. The longer the Sheep stayed alive, the higher the probability that they would discover the truth about Chuuya not being a traitor or become desperate enough to forgive his ‘betrayal’. Even so, Mori would not launch a campaign against the Sheep if the two people who knew of the old boss’ assassination were out in the wild. The mafia was far too unstable for that currently, implying that Mori would take no action if they vanished. Whether Chuuya fled or joined the Port Mafia, Mori would concoct a plan to dispose of the Sheep, most likely through an external organisation. He could not take direct responsibility for the Sheep’s extinction if he wished for Chuuya’s loyalty to the mafia not to waver, though that did not stop him from using other actors to fulfil his goals. And so, Chuuya becoming a fully fledged mafioso was pointless. Dazai could convince Chuuya of that.

Next up were practical considerations, such as money and shelter. He had plenty of inheritance money left from his parents’ untimely death, and he had successfully invested a significant amount of it too. Dazai’s father had been a rich former military doctor turned politician whom Mori had met while they were both serving as army doctors. Their history was why Dazai ended up meeting Mori; his father could not let the public hear about his son’s suicide attempt, so he turned to Mori to treat Dazai’s wounds when Dazai tried to kill himself a year prior. His father wanted to wash his hands off him since he saw him as the remnant of a would-be suicide, resulting in Mori becoming his guardian, which meant Mori had control of his bank account legally since Dazai was still underage.
Technically, Dazai was not meant to access his funds yet, but in practice, Mori gave him complete control of his account (probably so he could track how we used his money and lull him into a false sense of security). And what did Dazai do with his money? He took it all out of the account Mori knew about and claimed he had the money in cash for safety reasons (it was safer to have money in cash in the mafia, after all), only to secretly deposit most of the money into several foreign bank accounts that Mori knew nothing about. Having some of the money in cash hidden around was not a lie, it was just not the full truth. That way, he would always have a reserve if he needed money and not even Mori would have an easy time figuring out all of the accounts. In case Mori discovered one of them, he had the other accounts to fall back on and none of the accounts ever intersected one another. In addition, the accounts were opened under fake names at random intervals to avoid any suspicion of them belonging to Dazai, and the sum would not match up with the sum Mori knew even if Mori added all of them together due to Dazai’s investments and due to the cash he spent and spread over several locations. Thus, there was no evidence that they were Dazai’s accounts, which made tracking him based on them extremely challenging. From the beginning, Dazai had never put any trust in Mori, who most likely ordered his parents’ demise anyway, hence the extreme methods he took to hide his finances. With those measures in place, Dazai reasoned that they would be able to survive in hiding for months.

Exactly because he had no faith in Mori, Dazai had prepared hideouts. No doubt, Mori could work out where those hideouts were, but it would take him at least a few days to identify them. Staying at a hotel was too risky because they would be seen by employees who would snitch on them if threatened. The safest course of action was to stay at one of his hideouts for a day or two before skipping town. If they hopped on to another city straight away, his scheme would be too obvious to Mori, who would definitely check transport going out of the city on the night they disappeared in an attempt to find them. Conversely, if they waited a bit, that would give the mafia time to realise they were gone, but still in the city, which would make them concentrate their search efforts on Yokohama. Were they spotted, they could pretend to have been kidnapped by an enemy or something and that they had just escaped, then silence the mafiosi and make it look like they had been killed by an enemy syndicate before they could report back to Mori. On the other hand, if they waited too long, then the Port Mafia would wrap up their search of Yokohama and track trains, boats and planes going out of the city. It was a hard balance to strike, but it was not unattainable.

Overall, escaping was possible. Running away from the Port Mafia was going to be a challenge, though Dazai was sure that he and Chuuya could do it. An intoxicating thrill surged inside of his heart. Things were starting to get exciting.

Powered by exhilaration, he began to devise how to put the first phase of his plan in motion. He was about to embark on the riskiest plan he had ever designed.

Dazai spent the next month preparing to escape the Port Mafia with Chuuya. Over that month, he still found mafia work interesting, but he could see himself losing interest within a year as the work got more repetitive, and the mafia had failed to show him any semblance of the nature of humankind like Chuuya had done. As such, he had become certain that there was no point in loitering around in the mafia. He went over all of his hideouts and picked the most suitable one, which was a comfortable distance away from Port Mafia territory, far into what would have been considered the government and police’s turf. Even though they would not be able to use a boat to leave the city as a result, the Port Mafia would not have an easy time getting into that area without
going against the little law enforcement personnel they did not have in their pocket. His finances
were safe and sound, and he did not meddle with them for the entire time he waited for the Sheep
to push Chuuya out of the organisation. When he caught wind of the rumour that the negotiations
would succeed within the next three days, he sneakied into his hideout to stock it with fake
documents and some essentials, which he bought with cash while wearing a disguise. Likewise,
shortly before that, he succeeded in his plan with the files, which he had stored in a well-protected
concealed safe in the hideout. On the day of the event itself, Dazai reasoned that leaving Chuuya
alone in order to alleviate any suspicions of his involvement in his defection before going back to
him at night to take him out of the mafia was the most optimal course of action. In terms of how
they would get out of Yokohama, going by sea was out of the question since the port was under the
Port Mafia’s jurisdiction and a plane would have left too many trails behind, so they would take
several train journeys to random places until they settled on a destination. Now, everything was in
place.

The day has come.

Today was the day Chuuya was meant to join the mafia. Thanks to Mori’s spy in the GSS, Dazai
knew all the details of the negotiations and that the GSS would show up as the Sheep’s
bodyguards. He was given orders to wait for the betrayal to occur so he could ‘save’ Chuuya.
There was no way Chuuya would refuse when his friends’ lives were threatened, so Dazai had
already told his squad to shoot the GSS and leave the kids alone.

As he watched the exchange unfold, he could not help thinking that this whole situation was unfair.
Chuuya, who was strong, reliable, self-sacrificing and considerate, and who contributed more than
anyone else, was expelled under some meagre suspicions that were not even true by the only
family he had ever known, with a stab wound to boot. How callous of them. Sure, Dazai was the
one who created those doubts in the first place, but how little it took for the Sheep to turn on
Chuuya was surreal. Perhaps had Chuuya been straightforward in regard to his true reason for
investigating the rumours about Arahabaki with the Port Mafia, the Sheep would have been more
understanding, albeit Dazai doubted that. One way or another, either the Sheep would have been
destroyed when Chuuya was away for a bit or they would have betrayed him. Even now, Chuuya
was about to accept to become what he hated, a member of the Port Mafia, just to ensure their
safety. He deserved better.

Initially, Dazai felt a tinge of remorse at what he was going to do. He knew how much Chuuya
cared about the Sheep and that even amid their issues and internal conflict, he was still happy as a
Sheep. But watching Shirase stabbing Chuuya while on his crazy rant about being ‘smarter’ (yeah,
right, because banishing their trump card for some untrustworthy mercenaries was so clever), all he
felt was thankfulness. The Sheep were not worthy of Chuuya and he was glad that he could finally
leave them behind.

Quite frankly, the Port Mafia was unworthy of Chuuya too. Mori wanted to take advantage of his
strength and nature, to twist his positive traits for the mafia’s benefit. Dazai could not delude
himself into thinking that he was any more deserving of Chuuya, but he was in a position to stop
the mafia from using Chuuya until all the light that remained in him faded away, only to be
replaced by the same emptiness that gnawed at Dazai day in, day out. No matter what happened
from here onwards, at least Chuuya might not end up being exploited in the underworld’s wars.
Maybe he would join a government agency, the military or lead a normal life. While Dazai might
not have known what was next for either of them, he was an optimist; he had faith that things
would work out eventually, just like he had faith that he would succeed in committing suicide
sometime. For now, his priority was getting Chuuya away from the Port Mafia’s grasp before it
was too late.
Neither Dazai nor Chuuya said a word on the ride to the nearest mafia clinic after the guerrilla squad handled the GSS. Once he took Chuuya to the clinic to receive treatment for his wound, Dazai disappeared as suddenly as he appeared.

For Chuuya, this was the worst day in his life. He could not believe the Sheep kicked him out just like that… Ever since he joined them eight years ago, he had tried his best for their sake, and hell, even if he did not say it often, he loved them from the bottom of his heart. He kept thinking back on the situation, on his time in the Sheep, wondering if he could have done something to avoid this. He did not even react when he was treated; his mind was far too high up in the clouds.

None of this felt real, everything seemed like a cruel nightmare. It hurt like nothing he had ever experienced before. Being shot and stabbed was naught in comparison to this. At least with a shot or stab, it would heal if it was not fatal, but this… He was not sure that he could ever heal from this. Hours after the event, Chuuya was still so shocked and miserable that he could not even cry. And he was mad at the scheming bastard who planned all of this, too. Fucking Dazai, manipulating the Sheep and breaking their trust in him as if it were nothing. He swore he would make him pay for that someday. Preferably by murdering him slowly and painfully.

Most of all, Chuuya was angry with himself. How could he let this happen? All along, he thought that giving the Sheep his everything would help them prosper. The reason why he always worked hard was exactly because he wanted nothing but the best for them. Yet, it appeared that ironically, his efforts had the opposite effect. He had tried to do everything he could for the Sheep and turned into the main problem within the Sheep in the process. His power was enough to tip the scale, and in this case, he ruined the balance so much that the Sheep became a target for larger syndicates, which is why they could not trust him anymore when they saw him on the joint investigation and allied themselves with the GSS. Without Chuuya, the Sheep would have been worse off generally, but they would have been too weak to even be considered by parties in an underworld war, so they would not have had to rely on the GSS for protection as said protection would have been unnecessary in the first place.

He had been the worst leader ever, though he could not pinpoint what he could have done to be better. Looking back, he had always been thoughtful to the Sheep, never complained, proposed reasonable strategies, helped whenever needed and did everything he could, so where did he go wrong? What was he lacking?

Who knows, perhaps he could discover the answer in the Port Mafia. He still disliked the mafia and would rather die than work for them, although he had no choice in the matter. It was obvious that the mafia would go after the Sheep if he disobeyed them, so he intended to do his best for them, not out of devotion to the mafia, but out of love and gratitude for the Sheep. That was the best method to keep the Sheep safe.

Out of the corner of his eye, Chuuya saw a shadow at the window of the room he had been placed in. The lights were off, so he could not tell who it could be. Was it an enemy? Taking no chances, Chuuya activated his ability to surround himself in case he was under attack.

When the window opened, Chuuya threw one of the knives he kept in his hoodie towards the figure, who dodged it easily.

‘Wow, you sure are as violent as ever, shorty,’ an unfortunately familiar annoying voice said. Turns out there was no need for any action to be taken. It was just Dazai being a creep and coming through the window.

‘What the fuck are you doing here? Couldn’t you just use the door like everyone else?’ Chuuya was already feeling down, he was in no mood to deal with Dazai’s bullshit too. The bandage-
wasting machine was literally the last person he wished to put up with right now.

‘Shh, keep your voice down,’ Dazai responded at a lower volume, bringing a finger up to his lips. Surprisingly, the pale moonlight contouring his silhouette showed that both of his eyes were visible and that he was not wearing the black coat he had worn all along anymore.

‘Answer the damn question. And you better leave right afterwards.’

‘Why, I came to see my least favourite midget of a partner, of course,’ Dazai smiled while clasping his hands together.

‘Hah? I’m neither a midget nor your partner! Go google the definition of “midget,” you piece of shit!’ Chuuya stated with a raised voice, completely ignoring Dazai’s earlier request.

Dazai let out a deep sigh. ‘I told you to speak quietly.’

‘And I asked you to leave immediately, which you have yet to do. Have you just come to piss me off?’

‘Partially,’ Dazai admitted with a playful smile. ‘That isn’t the main reason for my visit, though.’

‘Hurry up and say what you have to say so I don’t have to see you for more than five minutes at a time, then.’

Dazai’s demeanour shifted. His light-hearted smile faded into a neutral expression, his brown eyes averting as he spoke in a carefully controlled tone. ‘Hey, Chuuya… What do you think of the Port Mafia?’

‘What’s this out of a sudden?’ Chuuya furrowed his eyebrows as he glanced at Dazai, attempting and failing to comprehend what had got into him and what he was getting at. God, he hated how hard to read the other boy was.

‘Just tell me. There’s no catch, I’m not trying to push you into a corner and I won’t tell anyone what you say.’

‘Why should I trust you?’ So far, he had given Chuuya at least minus three reasons to trust him. Not a spotless track record.

‘You can trust me on that since I’m not even meant to be here. I was ordered to stay away from you until your initiation and I sneaked in through the window to meet up with you without being seen. In disclosing your response, I would be revealing my disobedience.’

Fair enough. Why was he even telling him about his orders, though? Was that not a horrible idea? What if Chuuya decided to go ahead and tell Mori anyway? Luckily for the suicidal maniac, Chuuya was not that terrible even to those he hated, so he let it go and indulged him. He wanted to vent about his resentment and anger since he could barely keep it in any longer, and with someone who could not tell anyone being willing to listen, it was as good an opportunity to talk about the feelings that he would have to bury deep inside his heart henceforth as any.

‘I hate the Port Mafia. They wrecked this city and they’re the reason why so many of the Sheep have no parents to go home to anymore. Without them, the city would’ve been so much better off. I don’t want to do your filthy mafia work, but I’ll throw myself into it and dirty my hands as much as I need to if it means protecting the Sheep.’

That was good. Chuuya’s thoughts and feelings on the situation were not ideal, but they were
workable enough.

‘What if you didn’t have to join the mafia?’

The existence of a way around him doing the mafia’s bidding sounded too good to be true. ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Chuuya exclaimed in disbelief. ‘And let the Sheep be annihilated because I refuse to cooperate? Don’t joke around like that.’

‘That won’t be the case,’ Dazai declared with a self-satisfied grin.

‘What do you mean?’ Chuuya’s blue eyes widened, his mouth slightly agape. He was so confused. Just what did Dazai know that Chuuya did not?

Dazai’s grin transformed into a charming tender smile. He drew closer to Chuuya, taking a seat next to him on the bed. His half-lidded eyes glimmered in the faint moonlight and bore into Chuuya’s with a tranquil intensity.

‘Leave the mafia with me, Chuuya,’ Dazai said softly in a silky voice as he grabbed Chuuya’s hands with his own, his thumbs gently caressing them.

‘Are you insane?’ Chuuya yelled with fury seeping into his tone while withdrawing his hands violently as if he had been burnt. ‘What’s gonna’ happen to the Sheep if I do that? The mafia will kill them all to draw me back in, I can already see that occurring. Stop making fun of me like that, it isn’t funny.’

‘I’m completely serious.’ Neither his visage nor his voice displayed any hint of amusement or dishonesty, which was very rare for Dazai. ‘If you’re with me, Mori will never dare to lay a finger on the Sheep since he knows both you and I can leak the information about the previous boss’ death. I know exactly who to sell that information to for maximum damage, as well. His grip on power isn’t stable enough to survive a coup if the truth gets out and he’s aware of that.’

‘But that’s only valid for now. Just because he can’t afford to do anything at the moment, it doesn’t mean he won’t retaliate against the Sheep to bring me back later.’

‘Au contraire. No matter what you do, he has already scheduled the Sheep’s demise. There’s nothing you can do to save them now. Mori has put his plan to exterminate all of the Port Mafia’s foes into motion; he’s merely waiting for the right time to strike. With how his scheme works, he will be pulling all the strings, but the mafia won’t kill the Sheep directly. Instead, he will pin them against another opposing organisation to get rid of them. That way, he will technically not be responsible for the Sheep’s destruction, even though he will be the person who planned it.’

‘…You’re lying.’ Chuuya could not accept what he was hearing. Were his ears deceiving him? Was there truly nothing more he could do to keep harm at bay?

‘I don’t lie when it comes to such things. Mori was the one who forged the alliance between the Sheep and GSS in order to coerce the Sheep into expelling you and force you into the mafia. The Sheep wouldn’t have given up on you lest they had assurance that they wouldn’t be left unprotected, after all. They’re already as good as dead, and whether you play Mori’s game or not won’t influence the Sheep’s odds of survival. I bet that a year from now, all of your friends will have been murdered by an enemy syndicate and Mori will give you the false chance to save them and get revenge on the syndicate, just to bind you further and make you more loyal to the mafia.’

‘Don’t talk about them like that!’ Chuuya gripped Dazai’s shirt harshly. His hand was shaking and he seemed to be bridging into a frenzy.
‘I’m simply telling you what’s in store for you and your beloved Sheep,’ Dazai shrugged in a casual manner. ‘Given that whether you comply with Mori’s scheme or not is inconsequential to them and you don’t even want to join the Port Mafia, you might as well refuse to be a pawn for the mafia and leave with me. Of course, you can’t return to the Sheep now that they’ve betrayed you, but at least you wouldn’t have to work for an organisation you detest.’

‘But I hate you too!’

‘I’m not asking you to work for me, I’m just telling you to come with me for the time being until we reach a safe hiding spot and go our own ways. Capiche?’

Well, that sounded mildly promising. Chuuya had no hope for anything to come out of this conversation, but it would not hurt to at least hear him out; it could help him gain insight into how Dazai’s brain functioned, after all. But first… ‘Why would I believe you and what are you getting out of this?’ He was nowhere near stupid enough to trust Dazai was doing this in good faith without there being something in it for him.

‘I’ve decided that the Port Mafia doesn’t have what I’m looking for,’ Dazai stated regretfully. What he meant by that was a mystery to Chuuya. ‘Whether you come with me or not, I’m quitting anyway, and I thought I might as well drag you with me since you don’t want to join them.’

‘Why would you do that for me?’ Chuuya raised an eyebrow. Dazai did not seem devoted to the mafia, so his story was plausible enough, but there was still something off. He could just have left on his own; it sure as hell would have been easier.

*Because you’re too good for the Port Mafia.* ‘Because my mission was to bring you into the mafia and there’s no point in finishing the mission I’m abandoning by defecting from the organisation.’

It still sounded shady and as if Dazai was withholding information, but Chuuya did not want to stay in the mafia, so he would do almost anything to get away. ‘What’s your plan, then, genius? And how long would I have to put up with you?’

‘Simple. I don’t want to deal with you for extended periods of time either, so I’ve designed the plan to include hiding in Yokohama for two days before fleeing to another city or country. From there onwards, we can decide whether to stick together or go separate ways. I have enough money to last us both for months and I’ve already set up a hideout.’ To be completely honest, he lied when he claimed he did not want to spend any more time with Chuuya, but it was evident that Chuuya did not share that sentiment, signifying that he had to present Chuuya with both the option to stay with him and not to do so if he wanted Chuuya to accept his proposal.

Chuuya let go of Dazai and stopped to consider. In all sincerity, his offer was tempting. If that was indeed Mori’s strategy, then he wished to have no part in it. Listening to how the mafia wanted to use him while leading his friends to their deaths was unsavoury at best. He was furious that Mori had the gall to think up such a heartless monstrosity. The least he could do to give Mori some payback was not to play into his hand by remaining in the mafia. As for practical considerations, he could always steal until he found a more reliable source of income if he did not wish to depend on Dazai.

‘…Fine. If word of this gets out, I’m killing you in the most painful way I can imagine, so don’t think of tricking me.’

A smirk spread on Dazai’s face. Mission success. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it, partner.’

Why did Chuuya feel as if he had just made a pact with the Devil?
After having a quick look around to check that the guards whom Dazai apparently tased on his way in had not woken up, the pair was out the window.

They were officially on the run from the strongest organisation in the underworld.

Chapter End Notes

Now you know why the story is called Firefly. Positive phototaxis is movement towards light while negative phototaxis is movement away from light. I briefly considered naming the story Phototaxis, though I chose not to because it is a weird word with a rather unfortunate misreading (photo taxis lol).

Translations for the French:
‘I speak French too. How did you learn French?’
‘I have no idea, I’ve always been able to speak French. It’s your turn to answer my question now.’
‘On the contrary.’

I do understand some French (studied it for 7 years), but my French sucks, so shout-out to my awesome friend who speaks French for double-checking the French! <3

In other news, THEY HAVE FINALLY RUN AWAY FROM THE MAFIA! Just wait one more chapter (until chapter 6) and they will join the ADA, I promise.
Together, the two teenagers made it to the hideout Dazai set up for them, where they spent the night, with no hassle. Thankfully, there were two rooms and futons this time. There was just one issue with the hideout, and that was that Dazai had prepared it.

Apparently, Dazai must never have had to do his own shopping before, or at least Chuuya hoped that was the case, for otherwise, he could not explain how the fuck he forgot to buy any food except for canned crab. Dazai justified himself by claiming he did not know what food Chuuya liked, which was why he relied on them to go shopping early in the morning before the Port Mafia realised that they were gone.

Going in so early that they were the only ones in the shop would have made them stand out too much, so they waited until nine o’clock to go buy ingredients for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Since Dazai clearly did not know how to stock up a pantry, Chuuya was in charge of shopping and cooking.

‘I can’t believe you literally bought nothing but canned crab,’ Chuuya was nagging Dazai, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes closed in annoyance. ‘Is that seriously all you eat?’

‘Yes,’ Dazai replied with no shame whatsoever. ‘Crab is delicious, why would I want to eat anything else?’

‘Because your body needs more than just crab to subsist! You need a proper diet with a variety of nutrients so that your body doesn’t give out.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Dazai began in his tell-tale mocking tone that told Chuuya he was about to say something infuriating which would make him want to bash Dazai’s head in with the closest blunt object around. ‘How has your healthy diet been treating you? Gained any centimetres lately?’

Chuuuya did not react to the insult. In fact, he did not even move from where was a few seconds ago. Dazai turned around, only to see Chuuya staring at a spot on the sidewalk with a bewildered and anxious expression.

‘What’s wrong?’

Dazai followed Chuuya’s gaze. On the ground, near the entrance to an alleyway, there was a blue bracelet. It had the Sheep’s symbol on the inside. However, what was most concerning was not the blue bracelet itself, but that it was broken. Dazai’s brain instantly commenced racing through the possibilities of why the Sheep would be there. Had they learnt where their hideout was already?

Chuuuya moved to lean against the wall leading to the turn into the alleyway and ducked.

‘What are you doing?’ Dazai whispered, exasperation obvious in his voice and narrowed eyes as he went to take the same position next to Chuuya.

‘Shut up for a few seconds,’ Chuuya mouthed back. Putting his hood up, he poked his head out to face the alleyway.

*Blood.*
There were splashes of blood on the wall, but that was not the most upsetting sight. In the centre, amidst a pool of blood, stood a corpse with familiar pink hair that Chuuya would have recognised anywhere.

‘Yuan!’ Chuuya’s eyes widened in shock, anger bubbling up under his skin and hands balling into fists. How did this happen? She was fine two days ago! What was she even doing in this area, so far away from the Sheep’s territory? The pain of the Sheep’s betrayal still hurt so much that he had no words to describe it, but what hurt even more was seeing someone whom he had grown up with for the past eight years lying dead in a dark alleyway on the cold, dirty pavement. All of the good times they shared flashed before his eyes, reminding him that he will never have the chance to hang out with his loved ones like before ever again. Now, all that remained from that was nothing. The feeling that he was never going to spend time with her or any of the other Sheep ever again stung like a needle through the heart.

Beyond the grief, he felt rage. Pure rage more severe than everything else he had felt in his entire life. His identity crisis and even the betrayal paled in comparison. Chuuya might not have been part of the Sheep anymore, but that did not stop him from caring about them and wanting to protect them. He swore to himself that he would kill whoever did that to Yuan with his own two hands.

If his theory was right, uncovering the identity of the culprit was far from difficult. After all, Yuan was not alone. Next to her body, there was a young black-haired man with glasses. He was definitely not one of the Sheep and he did not look like the mafia type either. Was he merely a kichiku glasses-wearing rapist? Chuuya hoped he was not; not because he was not going to make him suffer and kill him anyway, but because Yuan deserved to at least die without something that terrible happening to her.

Chuuya’s attempt to get up to go confront the potential murderer was stopped by Dazai, who had joined him in staring at the scene. What the hell? Could he not see that he had to get revenge for one of his best friends? Was he really as cold-blooded as to let her death go unpunished? Dazai might not have had a reason to care about Yuan, but the least he could do to show some basic human decency was not to interfere in this situation, not after all the shit he pulled Chuuya through.

‘Unhand me this instant!’ Chuuya had to stop himself from screaming to the high heavens and utter that as quietly as possible.

‘Wait,’ Dazai instructed in the same hushed manner. ‘And whatever you do, don’t use your ability.’

That was when a shot was fired.

From the other side of the alleyway emerged a figure covered in black clothes with a mask to cover its face, a pistol aimed right at the young man who had barely managed to dodge the bullet in time. Oh, fuck this. Chuuya was not going to let some random person kill his target like that. The weirdo was his to destroy; he fully intended to avenge Yuan and interrogate the man to discover the cause behind Yuan’s death.

‘Stay here.’ He slapped Dazai’s hand away and rushed into the battle, dodging incoming bullets and jumping from a wall to another without the help of his ability until he landed a strong kick on the cloaked figure’s head.

Now that Mr Shady McShade was unconscious, Chuuya approached Doc Glasses, who had his back towards Dazai.
‘Hey, fucker. What did you do to her?!’ Chuuya yelled as he grabbed him by the shirt.

‘Watch out!’ Doc Glasses told Chuuya in a perceptibly panicked manner.

‘You can’t trick me so easily.’ Chuuya did not relinquish his grip on him, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. Did this man really think that he would fall for the good old ‘watch out; oops, excuse me while I run away’ trick?

At that moment, Dazai noticed a weird shift in the shadows behind Chuuya, from where the attacker had surfaced. The shadows morphed into something resembling a sharp edge.

Dazai’s body moved before he knew and he put himself in-between the shadows and Chuuya, nullifying what seemed to be a shadow control ability. So much for not using their abilities...

‘What do you think you’re doing? I told you to stay put!’ Chuuya let go of Doc Glasses and went to check on Dazai. Now, he was furious at Dazai too, but above all, he was apprehensive of what would have happened to Dazai had it not been an ability. Dazai might not have cared about his own life, but Chuuya had already lost everyone else and strangely enough, he found himself thinking that he did not need to lose Dazai too.

‘He tried to warn you, idiot!’ Dazai shouted back, concern hidden behind the indignation in his tone. He could not believe that he had almost lost Chuuya like this. What if he did not move fast enough? Chuuya would have joined his former teammate on the ground, lying in a pool of his own blood. Dazai did not think he could take that. As illogical as it seemed, it made him sick to his stomach. The rush of adrenaline that made him step in did not feel exciting like it did during their fight with Rimbaud; it made him want to drag Chuuya with him and run away, to hold on to Chuuya and keep him close like he was life itself. His knees were threatening to give out underneath him, his mind was not in its usual calm state and breathing was almost as hard as it had been when he was kidnapped.

Three more armed figures came within sight from whence the initial assailant appeared. Chuuya was confident he could take on three attackers at once, but there was also Dazai to protect and he was not sure that he could successfully evade all of the bullets without using For the Tainted Sorrow. Retreat sounded like the best idea at the moment, yet he could not let the one who most likely killed Yuan off the hook. He would have to use his ability – there was no way around it.

Before Chuuya could active his ability, the guy in glasses threw a smoke grenade. Fucking shithead obscuring their vision so he would not get caught. They had to locate each other in this confusion and flee. Both teenagers felt a hand snatching theirs, darting out of the alleyway immediately afterwards.

When they were out of the smokescreen, Dazai and Chuuya saw that they had not found each other. Instead, the glasses-wearing man was the one who had grabbed them both.

‘Hey –’ Chuuya started, ready to bite his hand off and jump on him.

Doc Glasses interrupted him. ‘Please follow me quietly. I’ll take you both to safety.’

‘Why the hell would we need you to take us to safety?’ This was absurd. Why would the person who killed Yuan try to take them to safety? Was he in the mafia after all?

‘Chuuuya, shut up and listen to him for now,’ Dazai said with a determined urgency that signalled he would not take no for an answer. He was not the type of person who did things uselessly (except for his minor psychotic episodes, such as that one time he shot the GSS member’s corpse), and
judging by his reaction and current lack of psychotic tendencies, the man could not have been one
of Mori’s allies, so Chuuya chose to obey.

The young man took them to what seemed to be a derelict building that had hosted a shop which
had gone out of business. After scanning their surroundings, he led them to the backdoor, which
had a padlock on it, and unlocked it. Once inside, he crouched down in front of a shelf, feeling
around the bottom of the last shelf for something. He must have pressed a button, for a few planks
of the laminate floor rose, exposing a secret trapdoor. The trapdoor had a keypad on which he
entered an unknown combination. Both teens noticed that he utilised the second joint on his finger
rather than the finger itself when punching in the numbers.

‘Come with me,’ he beckoned them.

Downstairs was a passageway of some sort. It was dimly lit and stuffy, but thankfully clean.

‘Where the fuck are you taking us?’ Chuuya asked, still fuming and eager to scratch the stranger’s
throat out.

‘To a bunker where they can’t track us.’ Bunkers were not that uncommon as the world was in the
process of recovering from the Great War, but both Dazai and Chuuya still found it dubious.

‘How fascinating!’ Dazai faked childlike glee and marvel. ‘Who would have thought that there was
a trapdoor and a passage hidden in that abandoned building? Hey, mister, how do you know about
this place?’

‘My parents own that building. They’re still trying to sell it after the shop went out of business and
built this as a route to their bunker during the war.’ What a spotless explanation. In fact, it fit too
well, in Dazai’s opinion. Chuuya could not disregard the feeling of unease in the back of his head,
even though there was nothing in the man’s tone that indicated a lie. He sure provided a lot of
information in one go to some boys he did not know, leading to Dazai guessing his words were
ostensible rather than sincere.

Several minutes of silence later, during which the man was texting on his phone for the most part,
the trio reached a metal door with a fingerprint scanner. The young man brought his hand up to the
sensor and the door immediately revealed what seemed to be a living room.

‘We should be safe now,’ he sighed in relief once they were inside.

Chuuya wasted no time in smashing Doc Glasses into the nearest wall. His patience was long gone.
‘Why did you kill her, you piece of shit?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Yuan! That’s the name of the girl whose corpse you were standing over.’

‘This is a misunderstanding –’

His expression contorted into one of murderous fury as he shouted at the man. ‘Misunderstanding
my arse! You better explain yourself right now so I can serve you justice for what you did!’

‘Chuuuya, calm down.’ Dazai put his hand on Chuuya’s shoulder. ‘Let him talk.’

Shooting Dazai a dirty look, Chuuya released Doc Glasses and put his hands in his pockets to stop
himself from punching him to death.
‘I wasn’t the one who killed her.’

‘And you expect me to believe that after we caught you red-handed?’

‘I just happened to find her. I was about to call the ambulance and police when you two appeared.’ He put on the most clueless doe-eyed harmless nerd expression that he could muster.

‘That’s a lie and we all know it,’ the livid redhead affirmed. ‘Were you a mere passer-by who walked into such a gruelling scene as a teenage girl lying in a pool of blood,’ he struggled to get the words out, the words getting stuck in his throat, ‘you wouldn’t have had a smoke grenade, you would’ve screamed to Hell and back or at least looked scared when you spotted her, you would’ve kept your distance so as not to tamper with the evidence and you wouldn’t have got attacked by that squad. Besides, the corridor and this bunker are too well-maintained not to have been used since the war.’ The short boy was turning out to be more of a clever spitfire than expected. It was the brunet whom he assumed was the smart one, but the ginger was not buying his excuse either.

‘Fine,’ he sighed in defeat, carefully manipulating his gestures, voice and words to portray an air that implied he gave up on lying and was about to open up to two guys he just met in a dark alleyway. ‘My name is Sakaguchi Ango.’ He showed them his private investigator badge for a second. ‘I’m currently on an investigation related to your friend’s death.’ Accounting for the fact that neither boy appeared gullible enough not to question his cover story and pretexts, Ango told them a partial truth. Since they knew the girl’s name, chances are that they might be able to provide useful information which could lead to the culprit’s arrest.

‘Ah, interesting! So, you’re an investigator?’ Dazai asked, maintaining the tone of innocence he had used en route to the bunker.

‘Indeed.’ It was not exactly a lie on this particular occasion. His current task was to investigate, so he was playing the role of investigator, even though that was not his job title.

‘I understand. So, the myths are true… The Special Ability Department does exist.’ A dark malicious smirk spread on the taller boy’s lips, his eyes glazing over until they resembled a bleak abyss. All the playfulness in his voice was replaced by emotionlessness and iciness.

Ango looked at Dazai in terror. He stiffened while trying to seem that Dazai’s words had not affected him; he was stupefied that a teenager had even heard of the Special Ability Department, let alone that he managed to work out that was the faction he belonged to when he had so little information to go by. Had he rescued the wrong people? He merely saw two kids get trapped in the crossfire by accident and wanted to prevent more casualties, so he took them to a Special Ability Department bunker.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Rule number 1 of the Special Ability Department: The Special Ability Department does not exist. *Semper occultus*. He was nowhere near stupid enough to break his contract and go against the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets purely because he bumped into some random kids who could possibly be dangerous. Perhaps his inexperience had been his pitfall… He had barely joined the Special Ability Department a few months prior. It was not as if the enemy using children against the Department was unheard of, he just did not expect to witness such a case so early on in his career.

‘Sure, you don’t, Mr Civil Servant,’ Dazai began with a pleased grin that was more frightening than Ango could have imagined on a teen. ‘You started off attempting to mislead us into believing you were just a person walking by while an investigator would have identified themselves right away. You only changed your tune when Chuuya said the victim’s name and caught you out. At that moment, you realised you could try to coerce us into giving you information, so you switched
your backstory. Not to mention that no passer-by or investigator just happens to carry a smoke
grenade or that pistol you’re concealing under your coat. Thus, you’re neither a passer-by nor an
investigator, so your investigator badge is a fake. A really good one, if I may add. It’s practically
flawless; not even a trained eye would be able to tell the difference. Only the government can issue
such authentic-looking fake badges. There’s also your caution when touching things. You used
your knuckles rather than fingers in order not to leave behind fingerprints, which signifies that
leaving behind a trail through your fingerprints would have severe consequences, such as
compromising your identity or a secret service hideout. Considering that one of the attackers was
an ability user, that crosses out every government agency except for the Special Ability
Department. Don’t bother denying its existence again, I know it’s real. You’re a pretty good liar,
but you still have a way to go if you want to fool me.’

With every sentence, Ango’s heart rate increased. Just who were these boys? Both of them were
uncannily observant, so much so that he could not believe they figured him out and blew his cover
within minutes of meeting him. The thought that he made a mistake in taking them with him to
protect them became overwhelming. Yet, he was glad that he at least took them to a secure place
where no potential enemy could hear what they had deduced, for if they made those accusations in
public, who knows who could have caught wind of them.

Regardless, Ango chose to dodge their allegations for now and concentrate on his mission. ‘If
you’re done, I have quite a few questions of my own to ask.’

It was the smaller boy who retorted, not bothering to veil his distrust. ‘Tough luck, ‘cause we
aren’t answering any of them.’

The civil servant suppressed a sigh. He was not paid enough to deal with this bullshit. ‘That’s fine
for now. We need to wait for my partner to arrive anyway. Let me know if you decide you want to
answer our questions and help us uncover the truth about what happened to that Yuna friend of
yours.’ Ango strolled to the table while texting an unknown person (his partner?). Once seated, he
took out his laptop from his bag and typed away at breakneck speed.

‘Her name’s Yuan, not Yuna,’ Chuuya corrected, some of his aggression from before diminished.
In all truth, neither of them were wanted to be questioned, by someone working for the Special Ability
Department no less, though if it was the only way to discover what happened to Yuan… They
could tell him too little information for them to be caught and taken into custody without lying,
right? The urge to do everything within reach to help solve the mystery behind Yuan’s death was
eating away at him. He did not want to compromise both himself and Dazai and be dragged into
the Port Mafia for real, but perhaps they could wrap this up as rapidly as they finished their
previous investigation. Their departure was on the day after tomorrow, so until then, it might not
hurt to cooperate. Even if they were sighted, with the Special Ability Department around, the Port
Mafia would not make a move. Chuuya hoped that Dazai shared his opinion on the matter.

Dazai knew that Chuuya officially wanted to be part of the investigation now that someone he
cared about suffered as a consequence of it. Whether they investigated with the intelligence officer
or by themselves, it did not matter. As for Dazai, he honestly believed that doing anything besides
staying at the hideout was a horrendous idea. Certainly, they were far enough not to be spotted by
the mafia, but there was always a risk of the unthinkable occurring and they had no guarantee they
could end this before their train departed. Lingering in Yokohama for too long could be disastrous.
Answering the government worker’s questions was doable, but getting involved in the
investigation like Chuuya most likely wanted? Hell no. Too bad Chuuya was just as stubborn as
Dazai, so one way or another, they would find themselves stuck in a Special Ability Department
investigation, whether Ango refused their request to help or not.
With the aim of studying Chuuya to guess what was on his mind in case he needed to mitigate the aftershocks of whatever rash decisions he might make, Dazai glanced at his partner. Chuuya had grief and worry written all over his face, his angry frown and averted downward gaze unbefitting of him. His arms were folded protectively in front of his chest. One could practically sense the atmosphere of uneasiness, sadness and irritation around him. Seeing Chuuya like that did not sit well with Dazai. He wanted to see Chuuya shining like a bright light, showing him more and more of the nature of humanity, not looking as if his inner fire had been put out just like Dazai’s had been from the day he was born.

Unfortunately for Dazai, he had never had to comfort anyone. In other words, cheering people up was not his forte. Under these circumstances, the best measure he could come up with to brighten Chuuya’s mood was playing along with the investigation and maybe even catching the murderer in the process. Oh, well, why not pass the time by potentially getting revenge on whoever killed one of his friends? It could be fun, and it sure as hell was better than staying inside doing nothing and drowning in boredom all day.

His thoughts were disrupted by the man in glasses. ‘And what are your names?’ Any semblance of giving them the benefit of the doubt disappeared the moment Ango discovered how sharp they were. Their timing had been too convenient, so now that he had little incentive to truly trust them, he intended to look them up to search for any involvement in organised crime. They might have been the key to pinpointing who executed the killings.

Initially, Dazai was going to give Ango an alias, but with a Special Ability Department officer, lying would only serve to get them in trouble and put them under suspicion. He did not need to deal with having the Department on their backs, so Dazai introduced himself with his true name, followed by Chuuya.

Ango entered their names into the government database he had access to as a member of the Special Ability Department. To his surprise, they were not lying about who they were. What was more surprising was that both of their files appeared as ‘Classified’. He hoped his security clearance was high enough to read the files without having to email his boss for permission. Sure, he could always hack into the database, but then, he would have to go through the trouble of explaining himself to his superiors. Due to the investigation, he had been granted temporary additional powers that only officers in a higher position would have had otherwise, and thankfully, he was granted access to the files with no issue. Dazai’s file came up first in alphabetical order, so he clicked on it.

Name: Dazai Osamu

Ability User ID: A5159

Age: 15

Date of birth: 19th June

Ability: Nullifying abilities

Affiliation: Port Mafia

Offence(s): Murder, conspiracy, extortion, blackmail, fraud

Summary: Even though he only joined the Port Mafia recently, he is already known as ‘the demonic prodigy of the Port Mafia guerrilla squad’. Seems to possess extraordinary intellect and excel at strategy, planning and manipulation. Not much information is available yet, though our
sources say that he is next in line to become a Port Mafia executive. Proceed with caution.

Notes: Port Mafia boss Mori Ougai is his legal guardian. Medical records show multiple suicide attempts.

Ango read the file impassively, not allowing his real thoughts and feelings to show up on his face. Oh, God, this was not looking great. If Dazai’s file was already that bad after barely joining the mafia a short while ago, that implied Chuuya was probably one of his associates, so his file could not be any better. Ignoring the growing feeling of anxiety, he opened the second file.

Name: Nakahara Chuuya

Ability User ID: A5158

Age: 15

Date of birth: 29th April

Ability: Gravity manipulation

Affiliation: Sheep (defected)/Port Mafia (suspected)

Offence(s): Murder, assault, theft

Summary: Nicknamed ‘The King of Sheep’ as the de facto leader of the Sheep. An extremely powerful ability user who can take down armed groups and multiple strong ability users at once. Has violent tendencies. Very dangerous, but unlikely to be a threat unless he or the Sheep are attacked first. Recent reports indicate that he has betrayed the Sheep for the Port Mafia, though this has yet to be confirmed. Avoid engaging at all costs.

Notes: See the related file on Arahabaki (requires special authorisation).

Well, that just went from bad to worse. He cursed his luck for making him run into a mafioso and the King of Sheep-turned-mafioso, then mentally slapped himself for allowing his wish to prevent more casualties to get him in this situation. Curious about who he was dealing with, Ango clicked on the Arahabaki file to ensure he had all the information he needed in order to determine how to approach this predicament.

Access denied.

Huh. Looks like not even his extended powers were sufficient to read that file. He would have to mention that in his full daily report after the interrogation was complete. With the knowledge of the teens’ criminal records, he emailed his boss with high importance, then waited for him to make the call on whether to let them go, keep them under watch or outright arrest them. Meanwhile, he checked Yuan’s file, which was nowhere near as grim as the boys’ files. Turns out she was a member of the Sheep without an ability, which did not make any sense or fit with the culprit’s pattern so far. Ango texted his partner again, informing him that the pattern was broken.

His train of thought was cut off when Chuuya called him to enquire if he can go buy breakfast or ingredients for it while they waited. The bunker was stocked with food, so he showed him where everything was and let him borrow the kitchen, helping himself to a glass of water when he sat back down.

Half an hour later, after Dazai and Chuuya finished eating, a tall red-headed man entered the bunker. ‘Sorry to be late.’
‘Welcome back, Oda,’ Ango greeted. ‘Don’t worry, I’m the one who’s sorry for calling you over on such short notice. Take a seat.’

Oda took a quick glance at the pair who was now at the table, parallel to Ango, and sauntered over to the chair next to him. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I ran into these boys earlier. They seem to know the victim.’

‘Ah, I see. Bringing them here was a good idea.’ He flashed them his badge. ‘I’m Oda Sakunosuke, a detective with the Armed Detective Agency. Nice to meet you.’ Dazai and Chuuya introduced themselves in turn.

‘The Armed Detective Agency?’ Dazai thought. That name rang a bell. Based on the few times Mori mentioned them and the information he read in the Port Mafia’s archive, it was quite a new organisation overseeing areas that the police could not handle comfortably. It stood between day and night, watching over twilight. Clearly, this Oda Sakunosuke was not hiding his true allegiance, unlike Ango had done in the beginning. Had Oda been lying, then he would have claimed to belong to the same private investigator business that Ango’s false badge was from. Ango not employing a fake Armed Detective Agency badge from the get-go made sense, for the Agency’s work was confidential and occasionally questionable, so claiming he was part of it would have betrayed how serious the case actually was. With the private investigator cover blown, Oda would not be able to assume it, presuming that both he and Ango were using the same cover story. Through Oda’s admittance that he was in the Armed Detective Agency, people might fool themselves by jumping to the conclusion that Ango was a detective of the Agency too, though Dazai and Chuuya trusted that not to be the case. But if Ango was indeed an intelligence officer, why were the Special Ability Department and the Armed Detective Agency working together?

‘I’m ready,’ Ango told Oda in a solemn tone. To an outsider, it might have seemed as if he were merely about to transcribe the interview, but Oda knew the true meaning behind his words. It was a signal that something was wrong; Ango was going to observe the duo while Oda carried out the questioning. Oda had expected no less since Ango’s texts indicated that he had run into trouble.

‘Thank you, Ango,’ Oda began in a calm professional manner before turning to Dazai and Chuuya, picking a pen and notebook out of his pocket. ‘We’re currently investigating a series of murders executed by an illegal group of ability users. We suspect your friend is the most recent victim. Could you please answer a few questions so that we can find her murderer and bring them to justice?’

‘Depends what the questions are,’ Chuuya replied, carefully watching Oda and Ango while returning to his earlier self-defensive posture.

‘I didn’t know the victim!’ Dazai whined like a sulky child. ‘Therefore, I reserve the right to stay silent for most of the questions.’

‘That’s okay.’ Oda’s voice was firm, but gentle and soothing. ‘None of the questions will be too private, we’re just trying to get the gist of the situation here. If any of the questions make you uncomfortable, let us know. We’re aware you’ve been through something distressing and we don’t want to upset you too much. We all want to catch the culprit and we’re all on the same side here.’

If Dazai and Chuuya did not have trust issues, they might have judged the detective to sound genuinely concerned and sincere. Neither of them could distinguish a hint of untruthfulness or ulterior motives.

‘I’m going to start. First things first, for how long have you known…’ he struggled to recall her
name for a few seconds. ‘Yuan? Did I get her name right?’

‘Yeah,’ the shorter boy confirmed. ‘I’ve known Yuan for eight years. We grew up together.’

‘I see. So, you must have been close, then?’

‘She was one of my best friends.’

‘My condolences. Losing such a good friend must be tough on you.’ Chuuya hated how close to home that hit. ‘Did she have any enemies?’

‘Not in particular.’ As a Sheep, everyone who was the Sheep’s enemy was her enemy too, albeit she had none personally. She had been close to two of the Sheep’s thirteen council members, Shirase and Chuuya, but that was not enough to make her a target… or was it?

The deliberate phrasing did not go over Oda’s head. While jotting down the response, he shot Ango a quick look to check how to proceed. Ango displayed no surprise or emotion as he wrote something on his laptop, so Oda continued the interrogation as normal. After all, if Ango did not find that noteworthy, it meant he most likely had the information they sought regarding that. ‘Did she live close to the crime scene?’

‘No, she lived in Suribachi.’ Oda’s eyes widened slightly. How peculiar.

‘Do you have any idea why she was so far from home?’

‘I haven’t spoken to her in two days, I was just as surprised to see her here as Doc Glasses over there.’

‘Is there something in this area that could bring her here? Like a restaurant or shop that sells something of interest?’

‘Not as far as I know. Everything she needed for her hobbies can be found within range of her house.’

‘Did she know anyone who could have convinced her to meet up in this area or with whom she could have come here? Say, for example, did she have family or friends who lived close by?’

‘Not at all. All of our friends are in Suribachi.’

The detective’s eyes sharpened. He noticed that Chuuya purposefully deflected the topic of family, but chose to drop it for now since Ango could uncover that information easily. ‘If that’s the case, then why are you here?’

‘I slept over at his place last night.’ The ginger pointed at the boy next to him.

Oda switched his gaze to Dazai. ‘Is your place around here?’

‘It is.’ Technically, his hideouts were his homes too, even if they did not feel like home.

‘Why did you stay the night?’

‘We were just hanging out.’ It was the brunet who responded, not the teen whom the question was aimed at. He sounded as if even asking about that in the first place was ridiculous since the motive
was so obvious. ‘We haven’t seen each other in a month, so we were spending some time together.’

‘Noted. What were you doing when you bumped into Ango?’

‘We were on the way to do some food-shopping.’ Once again, it was Dazai who answered.

‘From what I remember, the alleyway where she was found isn’t exactly out there in the open. What drew you there?’

Chuuya’s expression shifted into one of slight discomfort. ‘I spotted a bracelet on the ground, so I looked around the corner to see if I could still find who it belonged to.’

‘What does it look like? Had you seen the bracelet before?’

‘Yes, it was a simple blue bracelet she wore all the time. I thought it resembled hers, but I wasn’t expecting it to be hers specifically.’

Oda noted that in his notebook. A few seconds passed in silence. ‘If Ango doesn’t have any objections,’ Ango shook his head, ‘That’s all for now, though keep in mind I might have to ask you more questions in the future. Thank you for your cooperation.’

‘Can we go now?’ Dazai asked in his customary bored tone.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Ango stated. ‘Since the group saw you with me, that would put you in danger were you permitted to roam free. They’re very dangerous and they’ve already killed one of your friends. For the duration of the investigation or at least for the next few days, you’ll have to stay here. It’s for your own protection and safety.’

That was the reason they were told, anyway. In reality, while Oda was handling the interview, the news that the Port Mafia and Sheep had got involved in the case now that a member of the Sheep was attacked while the next Port Mafia executive and the former King of Sheep suspiciously showed up on the scene travelled all the way up to the Director himself. Director Taneda had decreed for the teenagers to be kept under strict nonstop surveillance thanks to the suspicion that one or both criminal organisations might have been behind the recent murders. Until the Special Ability Department worked out how they fit into the story, they would not be allowed to leave.

‘Eh?!’ Dazai exclaimed while Chuuya stared, looking incredulous. ‘You can’t do that! We have rights and I’m sure that’s against the Constitution! You can’t keep us here.’

‘The Armed Detective Agency does have the lawful right to suspend those rights momentarily if necessary,’ Oda clarified.

Shit. They were stuck. Lest they revealed that Chuuya was outrageously strong or that Dazai owned a gun (which was illegal in itself), there was no way they could persuade Oda and Ango that they could protect themselves. For now, they had to conform to their demands before using Chuuya’s ability to escape on the night they were meant to flee Yokohama.

‘Alright,’ Chuuya nodded. ‘If there’s any way we can help find Yuan’s killer, don’t hesitate to ask.’ Dazai resigned himself to the situation and seconded Chuuya’s words with astonishing insincerity.

Ango took them to what were meant to be their rooms for the foreseeable future before leaving with Oda.
On the way to the crime scene, Ango began to tell Oda about the files and his suspicions after he
gave their surroundings a fast look-over to make sure that no one could hear them.

‘Oda, the Port Mafia and the Sheep might be involved in the murders.’ He made sure to keep his
volume low, barely above a whisper. If anyone wanted to hear them, they would have had to
possess an inhuman sense of hearing or to have a bug placed on them.

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Those boys aren’t just some random kids. They’re with the Port Mafia. The one you questioned is
the former King of Sheep and the most recent victim was in the Sheep too.’

‘That doesn’t fit with the other killings at all.’

‘Indeed. I can’t come up with a reason why the Port Mafia and the Sheep would attack people like
this, though.’

Oda mulled the situation over for a few seconds before coming up with a semi-plausible
explanation. ‘Perhaps their real target is something else? Your Department, for example?’

Ango had to admit that Oda had a point. ‘That’s possible. If that’s what they’re after, then it would
make sense to send them in to lead us astray or monitor the investigation up close. But something
still doesn’t match up and I can’t pinpoint what it is.’

The detective shared his thought, although he had no idea what made everything so fishy either.
They needed to discuss this in more detail later. ‘Have you told your superiors about this?’

‘Yeah, they told me to keep them under watch until they’re clear of all suspicion. We can’t let them
know that we’re aware of their real identities, hence why I waited until after the questioning to tell
you this.’

‘Good call. I don’t think I would’ve been able to question them normally had I known this before.’

‘Thanks. I don’t mind if you question them about this later, it was just not the right time earlier.’

‘Agreed. I’ll probably have to do that at the end of the investigation or if they do anything
incriminating.’

Not too long after, they reached the crime scene. While in the passageway with Dazai and Chuuya,
Ango had been messaging the police to secure the area and collect evidence. He could not allow
the enemy organisation to clean up everything to preclude leaving a trail, after all. Even with the
police’s quick mobilisation, most of the area exhibited no sign of an attack occurring there a mere
hour prior.

By some stroke of luck, the police found a stray bullet. Ango utilised his ability, hoping that they
might be able to track down the culprit and wrap up the case. The Goddess of Fortune must not
have left them yet, for in the bullet’s memories, he spotted a warehouse where it had been stored,
as well as what it looked like on the outside when the bullet was loaded into the gun. No, it was
not exactly a warehouse; there were too many people and things unrelated to combat around.
Judging by the distance the bullet travelled, he also gained a rough idea of the radius in which the
building was. If his gut feeling was right, then that was the organisation’s hideout and he could find it by tomorrow. All he needed was to see the buildings within the designated radius and work out which one it was.

‘We’re done here, let’s go back.’ Ango shot Oda a small confident smile. Oda understood the real significance of that: he had a lead and could not risk exposing that in case the enemy was watching.

Before setting off for the bunker, they headed towards a few arbitrary places to get any pursuers off their back, taking care to only walk on crowded paths. On the route they planned, there were just two more or less unpopulated alleyways. Around these areas, they were always on high alert.

They had successfully passed through the first desolate alleyway and were now going through the second one without saying a word so as not to announce any potential enemies of their arrival ahead of time. At that moment, they did not know that not chatting on the way would not work in their favour.

Suddenly, Ango was grabbed from behind, the assailant covering his mouth. That was the moment Ango figured out that their seemingly sensible idea backfired. He tried to scream, but only barely audible muffled sounds came out.

It took just a split second for Oda to catch on that something was amiss when he realised his partner for the investigation was not at his side anymore. He turned around with his pistol aimed where Ango would be. A ghostly figure which seemed to be made from shadows held Ango in an unexpectedly firm grip while pointing a knife at his throat.

Oda shot at what appeared to be the arm wielding the knife, but the bullet went straight through the shadow. If he had to guess, he would say that the ability user could turn their body and parts of it into a shadow either partially or completely at will, so they could blend into shadows and physical attacks would not work on them lest he found a part that was not entirely transformed. From the looks of it, considering the humanoid shape of the figure and the fact that Ango could not move, everything except for the arm holding the knife fit that criterion. Briefly, he considered shooting the arm holding Ango hostage, but if his assumption about how the ability operated was correct, then the ability user could just fade into a transparent shadow and he would end up shooting Ango instead. For a fighter like Oda, that was the worst matchup he could have been pinned against.

Moreover, he could not get any closer to Ango and the foe since if he tried anything like that, the figure would cut Ango’s throat. It was a fight he could not win even with his combat ability, provided that no distraction ensued.

‘Drop your gun and don’t move,’ a voice with a foreign accent which he had never heard before came from the other end of the alleyway. A squad of ten men had their guns aimed at Oda. Fearing for Ango’s life, Oda complied. He could handle himself against them, but when one of his dear friends’ life was threatened, he could not do anything until said life was not in immediate unavoidable danger anymore.

Oda did have a plan to get out of this, though. If his ability not having activated itself by now was any indication, the group wanted to capture them alive, not to kill them. For now, he would play along, then retaliate once he was in a position to save Ango.

The man who had spoken stepped towards Oda and placed a hand on him. It was not an aggressive touch; Oda thought he would be seized as forcefully as Ango, but that was not the case, which was more worrying than being manhandled. Only someone who had no need to use strength would keep their touch as light as a feather.
Oda’s suspicions were confirmed when his body became sluggish and ceased to listen to his commands. His mind was clouding over, the urge to fall asleep stronger than ever. He fought it, trying to keep himself awake, but sooner or later, he knew he would give in to this ability. They were overpowered and there was nothing he could do anymore.

‘I’m sorry, Ango…’

In what he believed were his last seconds of consciousness, Oda spotted a flurry of orange and grey rushing past him faster than lightning. Before he knew it, the grip on him vanished and he came back to his senses. He fluttered his eyes open and saw Dazai nullifying the shadow ability, a pistol at the temple of the person who had been threatening Ango just seconds before.

‘Release him if you treasure your meaningless life.’ Everything about Dazai’s voice, eyes and visage resembled pure ice. Looking at him felt like gazing at an empty shell destined to wander in the darkness aimlessly forever. Oda knew that feeling all too well. The shadow ability user listened to Dazai’s instructions, yet Dazai did not back down or retract his gun.

Oda focused on the main group, ready to defeat them now that Ango was safe. He was not alone in this endeavour. The blur that brushed past him turned out to be Chuuya, who was currently on the offensive and doing a remarkable job at beating them all to a pulp, starting with the ability user who could put them to sleep. With the aggressors unable to lift a finger without risking one of their own, Oda knew it was time for the counterattack to begin.

Together, Chuuya and Oda knocked out every single member of the group that attacked them. They covered for each other with fast fluid movements, balancing themselves to bounce off one another so there was never a millisecond when they had a collective blind spot or stood around like sitting ducks. In terms of sheer fighting power, they formed a formidable team, even with neither of them using their ability for the course of the entire fight.

Even though Chuuya was a mere kid, his prowess left a strong impression on Oda, who found himself thinking in a few years, Chuuya would reach or even surpass him. It was such a pity that a boy this talented grew up in the underworld… Perhaps were he in the right environment, he would become a valuable asset and help a myriad of people.

Meanwhile, Ango and Dazai had wisely chosen to stand back so that they did not get in their way. Ango could swear Dazai had a wide smile and an innocent spark of delighted wonder in his eyes as he viewed the spectacle in front of him, as if he were enjoying this, which looked both fitting and deranged on a child his age in this context. On one hand, the expression suited a 15-year-old, but on the other hand, the actions that generated said expression made it eerie and disturbing in hindsight. He did not think that Dazai was necessarily an innately bad kid, but he sure as hell needed a leash and possibly a shrink.

Truth to be told, Ango was not incorrect. Dazai was, in fact, positively enthralled by the sight of Chuuya displaying that magnetic fire of his. It was purely mesmerising and even beautiful, which was not an adjective Dazai thought he would ever use for anything besides girls. The feeling of amazement he got during their fight with Rimbaud returned, and Dazai decided that he liked watching Chuuya fight, for it brought back that feeling and he could not picture himself ever tiring of seeing it.

And Oda was not doing too bad, either. He moved so flawlessly that it was astounding, though Dazai found it strange that he was a detective who fought like someone on the opposite side of the law. Witnessing him in combat, Dazai concluded that despite how warm-hearted he seemed, Oda was not a foe he would wish upon anyone.
However, Dazai’s joy was not bound to last. When Dazai was distracted, Ango swiftly handcuffed him.

‘Oh, my, aren’t you an ungrateful one?’ Dazai teased, letting out a small giggle.

‘Let him go.’ Chuuya spoke with cold controlled anger that sent shivers down Ango’s spine, promising horrible things to come if the handcuffs were not off within the next few seconds. Sensing what Ango was getting at, Oda restrained Chuuya.

‘Not until we start the second round of questioning.’

Chapter End Notes

Next up is the chapter we have all been waiting for!

Fun facts:
Initially, I wanted Odasaku to find Soukoku, but Odasaku would have seen the attack coming with Flawless, so having them meet Ango first works better.
‘Kichiku’ means ‘demonic’. I heard the kichiku megane (glasses) rapist is a popular stock character in otome and BL games, so I thought it would be funny for Ango to be mistaken for one.
‘Semper occultus’ means ‘always secret’. It is the motto of the SIS (British foreign intelligence service; you might know it as MI6), but I think that motto fits every security service and the Special Ability Department is basically a secret service. Since we do not know Dazai’s ability user ID, I just went for A5159. Why A5159? Because Chuuya’s is A5158. Assuming the numbers are assigned based on birth order (or the order in which the power was discovered) and that abilities are not ridiculously common, it would make sense for almost two months to pass with no ability users being born between Chuuya and Dazai’s birthdays and for them to discover their abilities around the same time (even if Chuuya does not remember when he discovered his ability, if we presume Chuuya was human before merging with Arahabaki).
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Heads up, this chapter is the longest one yet. It is 12000+ words long. For reference, that is more than twice the length of chapter 2. I was tempted to split it into two, but I promised to make them join the ADA in this chapter and did not want to make you lovelies wait any longer for the ADA!Soukoku you came here for. <3 I did put in more line breaks than usual so you can read this chapter in chunks if need be, though.

Without further ado, I hope you enjoy this extra long chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After taking an incredibly roundabout way to the bunker, the group were back, mirroring the positions they adopted during the earlier interrogation. Unlike before, the atmosphere surrounding them was stiffer and more distanced. It felt like an invisible wall was put between the two pairs, both of them eyeing the other with suspicion.

‘I told you to stay put,’ Ango sighed, massaging his temples. ‘How did you even get out?’

‘A magician never reveals his tricks,’ Dazai replied with a lively tone.

‘Good thing you aren’t one. You better reveal your trick right now.’ Oda did not sound pleased. Hearing that fuelled Dazai’s belief that no matter how kind Oda appeared at first, he was truly dangerous.

Having tailed the detective and intelligence officer, Dazai and Chuuya had heard that they were aware of their abilities and link to the Sheep and Port Mafia. Given that hiding any more information was bound to put them under further suspicion, Dazai surrendered and answered the question truthfully. ‘I took a picture of Ango’s fingerprints from the glass he drank from earlier, then ran the picture through some digital software to increase the contrast. I printed off a copy using the 3D printer in the study and used it to open the door.’

‘Why did you do that?’ Ango had not been trustful of the boys since they figured out his affiliation, and now, he had more reason to believe they were in cahoots with the culprits than ever. Were that the case, that could mean the Port Mafia was behind the murders, but why would the Port Mafia even do something like that? And the people who attacked them did not seem like mafiosi either, not to mention how downright bizarre it was that the boys would fight against their own. Was the initial theory of a third opposing organisation existing correct after all?

‘Look, it isn’t what you think it is,’ Chuuya put his hands up to signal them to stop their sceptical assumptions and spoke with mild anxiety in his voice, eyes widening slightly. ‘We wanted to help find Yuan’s killer, but we knew you wouldn’t let us, so we followed you.’

‘How much did you overhear?’ Ango’s eyes narrowed while he tried to hide his agitation in vain. Oda placed his hand on his stun gun and ensured he was as far as possible from Dazai. This could get messy if they were forced to fight the former King of Sheep or if Oda could not use his ability anymore.
Dazai interlocked his fingers and rested his chin on them, a cheery closed eyes smile gracing his features. ‘Everything. Which is why I can tell you that we aren’t your enemies, so there’s no need to get too trigger-happy, is there?’

Ango skipped straight to the point, allowing Oda to focus on combat if it came down to it. ‘What is the Port Mafia trying to do by sending you two to infiltrate the investigation?’

‘Actually, we aren’t in the Port Mafia anymore,’ Dazai declared. ‘We ran away from them and we don’t want to go back. We aren’t with the Sheep either.’

‘I was never in the Port Mafia to begin with,’ Chuuya clarified, sounding offended at the very thought of being in the mafia.

‘You were in the mafia for a few hours,’ the other boy retorted.

‘That doesn’t count!’ Chuuya elbowed Dazai in the arm.

Their statements baffled Oda and Ango. If they were neither mafiosi nor Sheep, then what was the whole point of thwarting the investigation? What exactly was their goal? And what did they mean by running away from the mafia?

Seeking to solve the inconsistency between their claims and their files, Ango addressed the issue directly. ‘Please explain yourselves.’

If Dazai wanted to gain their trust so as to successfully weasel their way into the investigation, he had to tell the full truth. For Chuuya’s peace of mind, he did not want to ruin their chances of managing to find Yuan’s killer with the Special Ability Department and Armed Detective Agency’s help, so he informed the men of their real reason for being in that area.

‘Long story short, my first Port Mafia mission was to recruit Chuuya. However, I realised the mafia doesn’t have what I’m looking for right before I completed my mission, so I told Chuuya what the Port Mafia’s intentions were. By that point, the Sheep had already accused Chuuya of treason, so he couldn’t return to them. We decided to run away and stick together until we reach another city where the mafia can’t get to us. We’re scheduled to leave the city on the day after tomorrow, although we were hoping to catch Yuan’s killer by then, hence why we followed you when you went to investigate. You already know who did it, don’t you?’ With the last line, the dark look in his eyes that felt as if he was staring straight into their souls emerged once again.

Ango raised an eyebrow. Their story was believable enough and he could detect no hint of falsity in the brunet’s words, but he was hesitant to trust them. ‘Why would we believe you when for all we know, the Port Mafia could be behind the murders?’

‘I’m telling you, the Port Mafia isn’t behind this,’ Dazai restated with a jaded sigh. ‘The murders popped up before we left the mafia and Yuan’s corpse was probably discovered around the time the mafia noticed we were gone. If Mori wanted to get rid of the Sheep, he wouldn’t bother to call one of them to a part of the city outside Port Mafia territory, not to mention that there wouldn’t have been enough time for him to get Yuan to come to this neighbourhood lest she was called here the day before and that Mori wouldn’t kill the Sheep to convince Chuuya to return. He would capture the Sheep or put them in an impossible situation which requires Chuuya to ally himself with the Port Mafia instead, then use them to blackmail him. Those who attacked us weren’t in the mafia either.’

‘That still doesn’t give us a reason to trust you two specifically.’
Chuuya snapped. He reached across the table and grabbed Ango by his shirt, bringing his face close to his with anger burning in his eyes. ‘You want a reason? I’ll give you a fucking reason,’ he shouted without masking his indignation and worry. ‘One of my best friends, whom I’ve grown up with, has been killed. I can’t just stand by when the killer is so close, especially not when I have the people meant to investigate it right in front of me. You saw how I reacted when I saw you standing over her corpse. Do you really think I would fake that on the orders of some bullshit criminal organisation that I hate for leaving so many of my friends orphaned?’ At this point, his voice hitched as if he was holding back sobs. ‘You know what my ability is, don’t you? If I want, I can blow this place up, beat you up until you tell me everything or steal that laptop on which I’m sure you keep all the files on this case and go investigate on my own. Whether you let me help or not, I don’t give a shit, ‘cause no matter what, I’m tracking down the fucker and killing them in the most torturous way possible.’

The outburst told Dazai that Chuuya was almost at his breaking point after being betrayed by his best friends, having to flee from the mafia with a guy he hated and seeing a good friend’s corpse, all in roughly twenty-four hours. Dazai’s heart directed an unpleasant stinging feeling which he could not name at himself when he realised that he had not noticed the toll everything had taken on Chuuya earlier. Chuuya was strong, both physically and mentally, but everyone has their limits, and it seemed Chuuya was nearing his.

Chuuya let Ango go and moved back to his seat next to Dazai, hiding his trembling hands by folding them into his arms and averting his gaze. Neither Ango nor Oda doubted him any further. They still had their reservations about Dazai, albeit they did acknowledge that Dazai had saved them when he nullified the ability which put Oda out of commission. If their claim that they were on the run from the mafia was true, perhaps they could trust them. Besides, both Oda and Ango had most likely been compromised, if the facts that Ango had been attacked in the morning and that the second round of attackers knew how to bypass Oda’s ability by not attempting to kill him was indicative of anything.

Looking back on it, Ango saw how unlikely it was for a whole squad to wait for him at the crime scene in order to dispose of him. Clearly, it must have been a trap, and he jumped right into it. If the opponents were aware of who was investigating them and what their abilities were, that meant there must be a mole in the Special Ability Department.

Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place. Under normal circumstances, such a mission would be handled by a more senior intelligence officer without any help from the Armed Detective Agency. That was why Ango was given additional powers; to make up for not matching the rank required for the mission in the first place. Ango was among the newest recruits, but he showed the most potential, so he was chosen for the mission. The Armed Detective Agency must have been contacted so as to lend Ango their investigative skills and ensure that an external investigator who could not have been exposed by the mole in the Special Ability Department was on the case. Had they passed the case over to the Agency, it would have been a dead giveaway that they suspected there was a mole, so the optimal solution was a joint investigation. That way, they could make up for Ango’s inexperience, protect him and make sure that the case would get solved even if the intelligence officer died in the process. Members of the Armed Detective Agency were no joke; unlike Ango, they would not go down in a fight within seconds without a gun, and with Oda’s fighting skills and useful ability, he would survive to report back to the Special Ability Department even if Ango did not.

However, the enemy had too much information about Ango and Oda. An intelligence officer whose cover is blown cannot work anymore. On any other occasion, Ango and Oda would have been taken off the case immediately, but in this particular instance, there was no one who could be relied on to take over, so Ango knew they would carry on with the investigation.
All hope was not lost yet. In front of them were two boys who had the brains, abilities and motivation to help the investigation. Most importantly, the organisation behind the murders had no idea who they were. They obviously did not recognise Chuuya, who had not used his ability a single time, and Dazai had not been in the underworld for long enough to have reached infamy outside the Port Mafia, which had no involvement in the case whatsoever. To summarise, there was little to nothing that could lead to the culprits identifying them. The only evidence that they got enmeshed into the investigation was the email Ango sent. Based on who received the email and whether the organisation discovered who Dazai and Chuuya were, Ango could potentially work out who the traitor in the Special Ability Department was.

Until then, though, Ango judged that he could let them partake in the investigation. Chuuya had made it evident that he was planning on doing everything in his power to unearth the truth, so they might as well work together.

‘As long as my boss has no objections, you’re free to join us on the investigation,’ Ango said.

‘Seriously?’ Chuuya had a surprised sparkle in his eyes, as if a glimmer of hope had reawakened in him. He regained some of his usual energy, showing Dazai another glimpse of that bright light inside of him which he was drawn to. Dazai could not stop a rare sincere smile from spreading on his lips upon seeing Chuuya go from depressed to hopeful.

‘Yes, just let me check with him first.’ Ango took out his phone and dialled a number. The phone call was inconclusive; Ango was told that he had to check with the next person higher up the chain in this situation, who happened to be the Director himself. Chuuya’s good mood faltered when he heard that. That did not last long, for Director Taneda approved of incorporating Dazai and Chuuya into the investigation team.

In light of the memories from the bullet and the high chance that Oda and Ango had been identified by the opponents, further investigation was deemed unwarranted. Normally, they would gather more information about the organisation’s leaders and so forth, but that was too risky in this scenario. If they knew who Ango was, they most likely knew his ability as well, and if they had been watching them from the moment they returned to the crime scene as presumed, that implied the enemy group probably had an inkling that Ango was aware of their headquarters’ location. Perhaps they even left the stray bullet as an invitation. Going by that assumption, abandoning the hiding place was going to be their next course of action, for if they loitered around, that would give the Special Ability Department time to rally their forces and launch a disastrous attack. There was simply no time left to wait unless they wanted them to bolt to another hideout.

As such, the next step was to go to the building Ango saw with his ability. It only took Ango an hour to pinpoint where it was and call for backup. Wishing to avoid undesirable attention, just the four members of the investigation team sneaked in, the backup squad staying concealed a short distance away from the building.

Upon reaching the two-story building, the group split, assigning Ango to work with Chuuya and letting Oda handle Dazai just in case the boys were indeed there to get in the way of the investigation. The secondary motive why they split was that the teenagers kept arguing, insulting each other and threatening one another on the car ride, so if those two were kept together, their likelihood of slipping in unseen and unheard would have diminished.
The building turned out to be much less guarded than expected, which was suspicious, but at least pairing the capable fighters with the ones without combat-oriented abilities boosted their chances of coming out alive, and they had the option of summoning help too. Everyone inferred that they were probably walking into a trap, but they had no other option to fulfil their goal of solving the case, so they went in regardless.

On the ground floor, Chuuya and Ango were searching for incriminating evidence in the boxes that were scattered around the storage room, which was the first room they ended up in once inside the building. Chuuya looked inside the boxes and took pictures of the weaponry while Ango touched them to check their memories with his ability. Each time he used his ability, the memories posed more questions about what was actually transpiring than they answered. For example, he had discovered that the boxes, weapons and ammunition were shipped from France. Judging by the origin of the boxes and the accent of the people who attacked them earlier, that meant they were likely at odds with a French or at least European organisation, but he had yet to determine which European organisation they were, and he could not concoct a reason why they would come all the way to Japan either. How did a European organisation even avoid the Special Ability Department’s detection anyway? Perhaps the mole was in a high enough position to let them in without telling others or they blended in with another organisation or something, he could not tell.

‘This one is different,’ Chuuya pointed out while taking out his phone to photograph the contents. ‘Are those… drugs?’

Ango walked over to the small box Chuuya was referring to. Inside, there were various liquids and powders.

‘Most of them contain ketamine, propofol, morphine and heroin,’ Ango declared once he processed the information he got from them through his ability.

‘So, they’re a mix of anaesthetics and illegal drugs?’

‘Exactly.’

With that knowledge, their confusion grew. Where did drugs even fit into this? First, they had a series of killings. Oh, and the most recent victim was in a criminal organisation that was not wrapped up in the case. Then, it turned out the serial murders were the work of an entire group rather than one culprit. However, said organisation was European and had not been detected by the Special Ability Department when they entered the country. Somehow, they had an unknown mole in the Department who had some role in this. And now drugs? What had they stumbled into?

Ango’s first guess was that they were a foreign drug cartel, but the supply was too low for them to be for distribution. He could not speculate regarding the motive why they had not used the drugs on them during the attacks either. This whole situation dumbfounded him. What he needed was more information.

Having gathered all the information they could from the storage room, they moved on to what seemed to be the living quarters.

Before commencing their exploration of the living quarters, Chuuya stopped and turned to Ango. ‘Hey, Ango.’ Truth to be told, he had already forgotten Ango’s last name, so if Ango had any complaints about being called by his first name, he could go ahead and tell him.

‘Have you found something?’ Ango asked.

‘No, it’s just…’ he trailed off, sounding uncharacteristically bashful and looking everywhere
besides at the person he was chatting with. ‘About earlier. I’m sorry. I accused you of something you didn’t do and lashed out at you when you’re actually trying to bring the group who killed Yuan to justice. Thanks for letting me join the investigation even after I was less than courteous to you.’

Ango was shocked that the ginger seemed to be more polite and reasonable than he originally gave him credit for. His file painted him as a dangerous monster, but the only human he could see in front of his eyes was a lost boy who merely wanted to do something for his deceased friend.

‘No problem. Don’t think about it too much, you couldn’t have known.’

They continued their search in silence. Chuuya went through the shelves and drawers while Ango touched seemingly innocuous objects like furniture. Not much was uncovered in most of the rooms, but they did strike gold when they spotted a meeting room. Meeting rooms and living rooms were always the best place to listen in on private conversations and reveal who the big shots were.

This occasion was no different. Within the memories of the meeting table and the chair at the head of the table, Ango saw who every key member of the organisation was and listened to their secret meetings.

What Ango did not expect was to see and hear familiar names. People and names outside of the Special Ability Department whom he thought were friendly and uninvolved in the matter. One name in particular was a name he had only learnt very recently.

‘Are you okay?’ Chuuya waved a hand in front of Ango, who had been spacing out for longer than usual.

Ango looked at him with a wary gaze, an overflowing sense of dread in his heart when he realised what the memories he had extracted signified. If his suspicions were correct…

He had to get Chuuya out of there right now.

Meanwhile, Oda and Dazai were on the stairs to the top floor.

‘Uh… What should I call you?’ Dazai inquired in a whisper.

‘Call me whatever you want.’

‘Then, I’ll call you Odasaku, because it’s fun to say!’ Dazai proclaimed in a mirthful voice.

‘That’s fine by me.’ Seems like Dazai’s tease attempt did not work on him. Interesting.

While going upstairs, Odasaku kept an eye out for any interferences and his hands on his stun gun. His steps were inaudible, like those of someone trained to infiltrate places for less than honourable objectives. Dazai replicated his technique, recognising it as a technique Mori had him study.

On the first floor, there were several guards, but Odasaku took them down speedily without making a sound. Whenever there was a trap, he always saw it coming with his ability and avoided or deactivated it. His movements reminded Dazai of the Port Mafia’s assassins, except for the fact
that he did not kill. Even when it required a change of tactics, more time or more complex
movements, Odasaku stuck to using his stun gun and did not fire a single shot from his pistol, nor
did he make an attempt on their life through any other method. Dazai found the juxtaposition
between the movements of a top assassin and the righteousness of a dedicated detective peculiar. It
did not help that he was perplexed about how Odasaku could have learnt those techniques while
being on the side of justice.

Eventually, they reached an enormous archive of sorts. As the coast was clear, they began to look
around and ruffle through the documents in order to find relevant papers about the organisation
they were dealing with. Mission reports, member records, meeting transcripts, financial accounts,
anything.

They skimmed through folders for about ten minutes before Dazai gave up. ‘These files are
useless!’ he complained. A few files did contain stuff that could advance the investigation, but
most of them did not fall into that category.

‘Agreed. Do you know what that means?’

‘That either the group knew we were coming and got rid of everything important or that the
documents we need are somewhere else.’

‘Correct.’ As he muttered that, Odasaku began scanning the area and exercising a tiny bit of force
on the bookcases to test if he could move them. While going from bookcase to bookcase, he also
tapped lightly on the walls.

‘I understand,’ Dazai said, a titchy grin tugging at his lips. The detective was indeed quite clever.
‘You’re looking for hidden doors behind bookcases and fake walls, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. Let me know if you notice anything.’

Then, Dazai proceeded to imitate Odasaku’s actions on the other side of the archive to cover more
ground. Not long after, Odasaku observed that there was a wall which produced a noisier echo than
the others and that the bookcase near it would not budge, so he waved a heavy folder around on the
shelves to apply pressure on them.

The experiment was a success. Once Odasaku got the spot of the opening mechanism right, the
wall moved to reveal a locked metal door. There was no way they could break it, so they had to
find the key or approach the Special Ability Department for help.

‘I’ll call in the backup,’ Odasaku announced while fishing his phone out of his pocket.

‘That’s not necessary.’

Dazai took out a wire from his pockets and picked the lock on the door within seconds. Odasaku
was astonished; he had seen his fair share of lockpickers in his time, but few of them could match
the boy’s skill.

Beyond the door was a smaller second archive. Once he ensured there were no traps around,
Odasaku strode in with Dazai trailing behind him.

Odasaku started reading through the papers. He grimaced with a confused look on his face.

‘Are they that bad?’

‘I have no idea, I can’t even read them in the first place.’
Dazai went over to Odasaku and glanced at the files before explaining the content of the documents in a jovial tone with a light-hearted smile. ‘You did it, Odasaku! What you have there are member records.’

Yet again, Dazai managed to astound him. ‘Can you actually read that?’

‘Of course!’ he said with a smug chuckle. ‘They’re in French and German, and I happen to be fluent in both. The shrimp can speak French too, so he can corroborate my claim if you don’t believe me.’

They spent quarter an hour selecting the most important files before they deemed that the evidence which they gathered was sufficient to bring the opposing organisation to justice. ‘I think this should be enough. Let’s go back to Ango and Chuuya.’

There was one thing that was badgering Dazai, but he could not bet on Odasaku answering his query in front of everyone, so Dazai chose to voice his thoughts prior to exiting the room.

‘Before we go, there’s something I want to know.’

‘What is it?’ Odasaku’s tone was calm and informal, like he was chattering with an old friend.

‘Ever since I saw you fighting that squad, something has been mystifying me. Despite being on the side of the law and refusing to kill, your fighting style isn’t the type that’s taught in self-defence classes. You fight like someone who’s had to fight in the real life-or-death situations of the underworld. Even when you move, you walk so that you make no sound, and you knew exactly where to look for traps and hidden doors. Most detectives don’t possess such skills… Which makes me wonder, just who were you before you joined the Armed Detective Agency?’ His blithe smile became an all-knowing smirk as he looked at Odasaku, his eyes void of brightness.

‘I was an assassin.’

Dazai had not expected such sheer honesty. He had believed that he caught Odasaku out, but Odasaku simply told him everything in a casual tone, as if he had come to terms with his past and moved on enough to talk about it with ease, which was a far cry from how Dazai perceived his own past.

‘Up until five years ago, I worked as an assassin. I felt empty. I didn’t care who I had to kill to make the most profit. I didn’t care how many children I made orphans because their parents had a bounty on their head. However, that changed when I met a certain man. I was reading a book that I loved in a café, but I only had the first two volumes, which I reread over and over again. He told me that if I want to see the ending, I should write it myself, then gave me the last volume in the series. Once I finished reading that book, I decided that I want to be a writer. I couldn’t dare to write about life when I took it every day, so due to that wish, I stopped killing. A year later, he came to that café again. Somehow, he knew about my previous profession, and when I told him that I refuse to kill anymore, he told me that he knows an organisation which could use my skills. He recommended me to the president of the Armed Detective Agency, and the rest is history.’

‘Woah, you’re so open about having such a grim history!’ Dazai was flabbergasted that Odasaku could discuss such things so nonchalantly, but above all, he was puzzled regarding why Odasaku revealed so much information about himself. Concluding that Odasaku would probably answer sincerely as he seemed to be speaking from his heart rather than brain, Dazai proceeded to ask the question on his mind. ‘But why are you telling me all this?’

‘Because I see that same emptiness in you.’
Dazai froze. Odasaku caught him off-guard like Chuuya had done a month prior. No one had ever confronted him about his bleakness so straightforwardly before. He had always thought that he was doing a decent job at hiding it by acting like a farcical eccentric so that no one would question him. It had worked on everyone he had known up until that point except for Chuuya and Mori, and Mori just accepted the darkest traits of his comportment without trying to tackle or fill that hollowness.

‘I don’t know if I’ll ever have another chance to say this, so let me tell you something now. If light and darkness are the same to you, you might as well follow the light. There’s no meaning or reason to live to be found in the darkness; all you can find there is terror, loneliness and sadness that would expand your inner void. You’re still young and getting away from the mafia is a good start for leaving that dark world behind. Don’t let yourself be dragged back in, for no matter what you’re searching for, the darkness isn’t the place to find it.’

To say that Dazai was impressed was an understatement. This man had seen right through him, and most importantly, none of his words held any ulterior motive. He was not telling him this to manipulate him or to misrepresent himself; he legitimately wanted to help Dazai one way or another, for he could see his past self in him. Seeing such genuineness was like a breath of fresh air. So far, the only other person that Dazai had met who possessed such a reminder of the true nature of humankind in the form of a similar candidness was Chuuya. He found himself thinking that he would like to go out for a drink with Odasaku sometime. Perhaps after he and Chuuya settled, he could keep in contact with Odasaku and see if he could find a reason to live after leaving the underworld like Odasaku.

For the first time in his life, Dazai felt full of hope. He had found not one, but two people who showed him the pure nature of humanity in their own ways and who made him feel as if he actually had a chance to discover a reason to live.

Before either could speak another word, they heard a loud noise coming from downstairs. They looked at each other with identical concerned expressions. Chuuya and Ango were meant to be there. Chuuya could fight and get himself and Ango out unscathed easily, but if they had been detected, they all had to get out as soon as possible.

Dazai and Odasaku made their way downstairs as quietly and swiftly as they could. However, their journey was nowhere near as smooth as it had been when they went upstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, they were welcomed by a swarm of bullets. Odasaku grabbed Dazai and retreated to one of the rooms nearby. The number of people around the area had grown exponentially in the short time they had spent in the archives, and they were all aware of their presence.

‘So it was a trap after all.’

‘Yeah.’

‘We can escape through the window –’

‘I’m not leaving Ango and Chuuya behind,’ Odasaku asserted with determination as he contacted the Special Ability Department team on standby.

‘Chuuya can take care of this.’ Dazai had complete faith in Chuuya’s ability. If anyone could come out of this alive, it was Chuuya, and Ango had Chuuya with him, so they would both be fine.

Odasaku’s unsettled reaction when trying to call in the backup made Dazai become less convinced by his own words. No one picked up the call. Given that nobody answered in spite of being
ordered to do so, the team had likely been eliminated.

‘…I take that back.’

‘Stay behind me, I’m gonna’ get us both to them.’

With that, Odasaku handed him the files and took off into the battlefield. Thanks to the flashbangs and smoke grenades he had attached to his belt, he managed to obscure the enemies’ line of vision and made quick work of them, making Dazai marvel at his combat prowess once again. Whenever an opponent with a strong ability showed up, Dazai assisted Odasaku, and together, they reached their destination in minutes.

As they neared the spacious storage room, they discerned that the sounds they heard earlier resembled things being thrown around, which most likely indicated that Chuuya was using gravity to control them. Unfortunately, the amount of assailants rose the closer they got to the area.

When Odasaku and Dazai arrived, Chuuya was in combat with at least three dozen humans while desperately trying to either get to Ango or create a window of opportunity for Ango to flee, which was proving very difficult. If he utilised the full extent of his power, he risked hitting Ango too, but he could not leave him behind when hundreds of bullets were flying towards them. As they were on parallel sides of the room, Chuuya was focusing on blocking the bullets aimed for Ango, leaving him with little time to concentrate on the fight, especially considering that several of the attackers were ability users who charged at both Ango and Chuuya. Overall, it was a mess.

Knowing how unlikely it was for them to get out unaided, Odasaku took down the men obstructing the exit and went in, using the boxes to hide from the shots while Dazai was on the lookout for any outside interferences or ability users whom Odasaku could not win against. Odasaku could not use the smoke grenades while so far apart from them since if Chuuya could not see them, he could not protect them, so he threw the few flashbangs that remained after the tumultuous journey downstairs in order to signal for Ango to use his as well.

Thankfully, Ango was much closer to the exit than Chuuya. Once Odasaku got a hold of Ango, Chuuya pulled up a gigantic chunk of the ground underneath to shield them from the incoming fire, then flew to assist in their escape, which was now possible as Odasaku had taken care of those preventing them from leaving the room previously. Reunited, the group of four ran to the main exit, but the way out was blocked by another horde of people. And so, they retreated to the hidden archive upstairs, for the first floor was still safe due to Odasaku’s earlier efforts.

‘What happened?’ Odasaku asked once they were inside.

‘We were suddenly attacked when we tried to get to the exit,’ Chuuya explained.

Ango turned to Chuuya with evident panic on his face. ‘Chuuya, you need to leave immediately,’ he said in an urgent pleading voice.

‘Hah? Are you kidding? One of those bastards killed Yuan and I’m gonna’ find out who it was, then obliterate them.’

‘Good luck doing that when they’ve encircled the building and no backup is available,’ Dazai uttered in a sardonic manner while frowning at his phone. ‘I saw an even bigger crowd awaiting us outside. Nobody answered when Odasaku tried to call the squad on standby earlier and they’re jamming our communications, if my phone not working if anything to go by.’ He showed them the screen, which displayed that the phone had no signal.
In other words, they were surrounded and could not contact the outside world. They could not stay in the archive forever either.

‘We’re done for,’ Dazai said, having accepted their fate.

‘No, it’s not over yet,’ Chuuya replied, his voice concerning neutral as if not even he was sure of himself. ‘I have an idea. It isn’t something I’ve ever tried before, but if my gut feeling is correct, it’s gonna’ work.’ He drew closer to Dazai and looked at him, intensity and graveness pooling into his eyes. ‘But… I might need your help, Dazai. Can I trust you? And do you trust me?’

Dazai had asked him the same thing during their fight with Rimbaud, to which Chuuya gave no answer. Unlike back then, this time, the question was not met with no response.

‘Yes,’ Dazai answered in an instant, and much to his surprise, he found trusting Chuuya as natural as breathing. That affirmation was not the result of well-thought calculations, it just felt right.

‘What do you need me to do?’

‘Stop me when it’s over.’

‘Got it.’

Chuuya went to the door, motioning for Dazai to come with him.

‘Odasaku, Ango,’ Dazai began in a serious tone, passing them the documents he and Odasaku had collected. ‘Please go ahead and get away when you have the chance.’

They nodded. Given the nature of Chuuya’s ability, they acknowledged that he fought best alone, because having people around restricted his range and movements. The only one who could be of any help to him was Dazai, who could step in if an opponent with an ability out of his league popped up.

Dazai released the safety on his pistol and followed Chuuya, gunshots resounding from the moment they emerged out of the room. Chuuya disposed of most of the people who were dumb enough to engage them, but Dazai provided support to ease his burden.

If their enemies were clustered far away from the exit in an expansive room where Chuuya could unleash his ability, the likelihood that none of them would perish in the process increased, hence why Dazai and Chuuya chose to return to the storage room. Faced with the extraordinary fighting power and teamwork of the two boys, more and more of those waiting outside fell for their plan, opening up the way for Odasaku and Ango to get out.

‘Stand back,’ Chuuya instructed once Dazai confirmed that Odasaku and Ango were not in the building anymore.

With that, Chuuya darted into the middle of the crossfire.

‘Oh, grantors of dark disgrace, do not wake me again.’

Gravity made the earth under him crumble to dust as odd red and black shapes surfaced on his skin. Eerie crazed laughter which did not sound like normal Chuuya filled the room. What appeared to be black holes showed up at his fingertips and were promptly hurled at the organisation’s members.

Chuuya tossed boxes and pieces of earth and concrete at the group, decimating their numbers with every hit. When just a few people were left, Chuuya switched to close quarters. He broke their
necks, tore their limbs, ripped their hearts out of their chests, punched them in their guts so hard that they exploded and spilled out of their bodies, smashed their faces, kicked their heads in and worse.

And Dazai found the gory violence exquisite.

Previously, during their fight with Rimbaud, Chuuya had already managed to amaze Dazai. Now, he was rendered speechless. In front of him was the raw humanity and thrill he had been seeking. Normal people might have been scared for their life when faced with an out-of-control God of Destruction, but Dazai had never been normal to begin with, so he felt a pull towards the relentless destruction rather than the need to run away in fear. At that moment, Dazai realised that he had met his match, his equal, and he loved it. He was so glad that he chose to stop wasting time in the mafia and stick around Chuuya instead.

The spectacle was so fun and breath-taking to watch that Dazai could have watched Chuuya like that for an eternity and never get bored. A smile brighter than any other smile he had had over the past years spread on his lips and his eyes showcased the awe and admiration engulfing his heart. He officially counted staying with Chuuya as the best decision he had ever made.

Sadly, he could not stand around and enjoy the view as much as he would have liked. Chuuya coughed blood as he kept going and going, even after everyone was dead. That was Dazai’s cue to intervene.

Dazai marched through what was left of the ruined building towards the irrepressible figure using his ability in the most chaotic and illogical manner possible. Upon sighting him, Chuuya threw a black hole at him, only for the black hole to dissipate once it made contact with Dazai. When that did not work, he propelled a chunk of the shattered ground underneath towards him, though the earth fell as if it had never had any momentum without leaving a scratch on Dazai the moment it reached him.

‘God, you’re such an uncontrollable beast… Good thing I’m here.’

Dazai touched Chuuya’s cheek with his right hand and Chuuya started to return to normal. Incapable of standing due to the toll the fight had taken on him, Chuuya fell and was caught by Dazai before his face plummeted into the ground. Dazai pulled Chuuya close, supporting his weight once Chuuya inadvertently buried his face in his chest.

‘That’s enough, Chuuya. Good work.’

‘Thanks… for stopping me…’ Chuuya uttered in a coarse voice before passing out.

‘Anytime, partner.’

In the centre of the fragmented ground and wreckage, surrounded by blood, corpses, innards and severed body parts, the two boys were the only survivors.

Chuuya woke up in a room he had never seen before. All the agonising pain overwhelming his body earlier was gone. He opened his eyes slowly, finding it difficult to adjust to the bright light. A few hours must have passed, for the sky outside the window took on a rusty shade.
‘Morning, shorty.’

At his side stood Dazai, who instantaneously beamed in relief and closed that book on suicide methods which he seemed to love so much when Chuuya opened his eyes. Chuuya told himself he definitely did not like his smile and blissful expression, though he did admit that he preferred smiling Dazai to empty shell Dazai.

‘Where are we?’

‘We’re at the Armed Detective Agency. I carried you to Ango’s car and Odasaku drove us here to get your wounds treated.’

They really did that for him? Chuuya was grateful for their help, although he also felt bad for putting them through the trouble of having to carry him. He made a mental note to thank Ango and Odasaku.

‘I got to say, though, for someone so small, you certainly weigh a lot.’

…And once again, every semblance of guilt evaporated the moment Dazai opened his mouth. Now, Chuuya wished he could use his ability when Dazai was touching him just to make himself weigh a literal tonne by increasing his mass, simply to torture Dazai and hopefully break his arms in the process.

‘It’s called “muscle,” not that an octopus like you would know how that feels,’ Chuuya replied, raising his voice.

‘Actually, I did carry you, so I know how muscle feels –’

‘That’s not what I meant!’

‘It’s good that you’re so lively right after waking up,’ a woman who had just entered the room said. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Better than ever,’ Chuuya responded. ‘What happened to my wounds?’

‘When Oda and the others brought you here, you were seconds away from death, so I used my ability to heal you,’ she explained with a smile. ‘I’m Yosano Akiko, the Agency’s doctor. My ability, Thou Shalt Not Die, allows me to heal people on the brink of death.’

Chuuya got up and bowed respectfully. ‘Thank you for saving my life, Doctor Yosano.’ He officially counted himself in debt to the person who saved him. Out of gratitude, he wanted to repay her somehow, albeit he had no idea how to go about that.

‘You’re welcome, kid. Let me dissect you sometime in return, will you?’

Chuuya did not miss the sadistic look in her eyes and silently wondered if she was a nutcase like Dazai. He really, really did not want to have to answer that. However, she did save his life, and if that was the repayment she wanted, then he would concede. ‘Deal, but only if you heal me afterwards.’

Yosano put on a smirk that Dazai could only have described as overjoyed and creepy. ‘I will, obviously!’

Dazai watched the exchange with immense incredulity written all over his face. ‘Are you serious?! Why would anyone agree to that?’ And people said he was mental. At least he was not insane
enough to put himself through horrendous pain voluntarily.

‘She did save my life. I’m not scared of pain, and it’s not like I can’t take it.’

Yosano seemed pleased with his answer. ‘Oh, you have guts! I’m starting to like you already.’

Shortly afterwards, Odasaku came in to let them know that he wanted to have a word with Dazai and Chuuya in regard to the investigation tomorrow. For now, though, he would let them rest. They stayed at the Agency dormitory for the night.

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In the morning, Odasaku came to pick them up. He took them to a café on a lower floor of the building where the Armed Detective Agency had its office.

At one of the tables stood Ango and a middle-aged man whom Dazai and Chuuya did not recognise. Odasaku took a seat next to Ango while the teens sat opposite them.

The unfamiliar man was the first to speak. ‘Hello, Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuuya. My name is Taneda. I’m the Director of the Special Ability Department.’

Both Dazai and Chuuya were bewildered and wore the same expression of neutral confusion. They could not guess why the Director of the Special Ability Department himself believed it necessary to converse with them in person. Perhaps his aim was to get them to reveal all of the Port Mafia’s secrets? Chuuya knew little about the mafia and Dazai was unwilling to blab since Mori would come after them for sure if he snitched to the Department. Silence was in their best interest, so Dazai commenced formulating plans to get out of the situation without providing any useful information which could give the mafia a hint about their defection.

‘I’m here to talk to you about the investigation.’

Neither boy let his guard down. Making people comfortable to manipulate them into lowering their defence in order to obtain information they would not be eager to give otherwise is a staple tactic for detectives and secret service personnel. It is an effective strategy, although it was destined to fail here.

‘Is the bastard who killed Yuan dead?’ Chuuya enquired.

‘It seems so,’ Ango answered. He had known who killed Yuan ever since he leaned down to touch her clothes right before he met the teens, albeit he could not inform them of that at the time since he had no proof that they were not enemies. ‘All of the people who attacked us at the hideout are dead, so it’s safe to say you avenged her.’

‘Serves them right. A few things still don’t make sense, though. Why did they kill Yuan and the others? And what was up with the drugs?’

‘The group was contracted by a foreign organisation to dispose of ability users who crossed them.’

‘But Yuan didn’t have an ability!’

‘Indeed. We think that Yuan was unfortunately mistaken for an ability user or for someone else. As for the drugs, their purpose was to tranquilise the victims.’
Even though Chuuya was more or less satisfied with the justification, the same could not be claimed about Dazai. Ango was not lying, but it felt as if he was omitting things, if how unspecific Ango was about whether Chuuya certainly got Yuan’s murderer or not was anything to judge from. Literally all of the words he used in those sentences were uncertain and left room for error instead of being absolute. Why would a foreign syndicate care about some ability users in Japan anyway? Besides, ketamine is meant for horses rather than humans, and during the fight, the opponents did not seem intent on killing Chuuya once Odasaku and Ango were out of the picture. Not to mention that Ango suddenly wanting Chuuya to leave the building was weird and that Yuan of all people being confounded with another person somehow was too much of a coincidence. Something was off and he could not work out what exactly it was.

They spent half an hour reviewing what they had done over the course of the investigation, what they found out and finishing it up with any further thoughts. Chuuya sent them the evidence he collected and both boys had to sign the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets in order to stop them from leaking sensitive information about the investigation.

Just when they assumed their chat was over, Taneda changed the subject.

‘Ango told me you’re on the run from the Port Mafia. Is that true?’ There it was, the real aim of the conversation. Needless to say, Dazai was already preparing to implement his strategy to end the discussion.

‘Yes,’ they affirmed in unison.

‘May I ask why?’

‘Because the Port Mafia are a bunch of scheming and conniving pieces of shit who tried to blackmail me into joining them by promising to ensure my friends’ safety, only to plan to get them all killed anyway.’ His voice was filled to the brim with anger and resentment. Everyone stared at Chuuya and attempted to overlook the minor outburst.

Dazai sighed. He was fine with talking about their joint mission, though his objective was not to disclose anything else about his time in the mafia, so he would have to be careful with his words once they summed up their first Port Mafia task. They were so going to get grilled about that and he was not looking forward to it. ‘I decided the mafia isn’t for me, so I left with Chuuya.’

Cue having to explain themselves and discussing Dazai’s mission to bring Chuuya into the Port Mafia in great detail while Ango transcribed everything with his ridiculous typing speed which made everyone question whether he was human or not. They spoke about the Arahabaki investigation, each of them omitting specific elements they were not comfortable sharing. In the end, Odasaku, Ango and Director Taneda got the entire story, except for Chuuya being Arahabaki’s vessel and Dazai’s real motives for quitting.

After listening to their tale and future plans attentively, Director Taneda continued to the main topic of interest. ‘I see. Just to reiterate, you aren’t in the Port Mafia or Sheep anymore, you aren’t going back and you have no intention of getting involved in organised crime in the future.’

‘That’s right.’ Much to their displeasure, Dazai and Chuuya responded at the same time again.

A delighted smile showed up on the Director’s face. ‘How about joining the Special Ability Department, then?’ he offered, much to Ango’s chagrin. Ango’s face displayed pure anxiety and terror at that moment. Putting the batshit insane and cunning Dazai together with the absurdly strong and hot-headed Chuuya could be effective, but it could also be a recipe for pure chaos like the Department had never seen before, and observing how these two seemed and interacted, Ango
could bet that they would cause so much trouble that he would get a headache every day. Had he been in a higher position, he would have told the Director that it was a horrible idea. Alas, he was but a low-ranked civil servant who had barely joined the Department several months prior, so as it was, he had to keep his mouth shut.

‘Pass!’ Dazai replied within a split second, forming an X with his arms. Ango instantly became a believer and thanked the Lord. ‘I don’t like workplaces with lots of rules.’ Joining the Special Ability Department was an overall good idea because even the Port Mafia was afraid of them, not to mention that Chuuya would probably have flourished in it, but Dazai wanted to stay with Chuuya and he was only willing to endure ideas within bearable limits. Had he joined the Special Ability Department, he doubted he would have lasted that long.

That was when Odasaku made a proposal. ‘Then, how about you two join the Agency?’

‘That might work,’ Director Taneda agreed. ‘What do you say, boys? I will have a word with Fukuzawa if you want.’

‘I’m willing to vouch for you too,’ Odasaku seconded.

Dazai and Chuuya exchanged a look. They were unsure about this. On one hand, joining an organisation with the Special Ability Department’s support could give them something interesting to do, provide them a source of income and confer them a degree of protection from Mori and the Port Mafia. On the other hand, joining an organisation which dealt with the underworld would undoubtedly put them on the front line against Mori, so they would not be able to hide anymore. They were stuck between taking the chance presented to them and running far away to avoid being pulled back into the mafia.

‘We should wait to see what this Fukuzawa you’re referring to says before we get ahead of ourselves,’ Dazai replied noncommittally. Neither of them was ready to make a decision; they needed to think this through a while longer and learn more about the Agency before jumping into it.

‘I’m sure he’ll agree to it,’ the Director said with confidence.

Dazai knew they were being pressured to decide on the spot, but this was not a choice they could make that fast. They needed to have a talk about this first. ‘I’d like to know more about what we would be getting into before we give you our answers.’

‘That’s a great idea! If I may suggest one thing,’ Taneda started while turning to Odasaku, ‘Would you mind telling them a bit more about the Agency, Oda?’

‘Not at all, I’m open to any questions about the Agency and the work we do. I’m sure the others would be okay with being asked for their views on the matter as well.’

‘Perfect, thank you. In that case, I’ll leave you to it and inform Fukuzawa about this.’

With that, both Special Ability Department operatives departed.

Odasaku filled Chuuya in on his backstory and proceeded to voice his opinions on the Agency. ‘I love working for the Agency not just because the work is interesting, but also because as a detective, I can use my ability and fighting skills to protect orphans and help people. I could never assign a meaning to life in the underworld, no matter how hard I searched for it, but from the moment I joined, my life took on a new meaning: dedicating myself to saving others. By being on the side of good, I can learn about life so I can write about it, and by not killing, I obtain the right
to live and write about life. I can’t imagine a better place to be than the Agency. I’m not just saying so to sell it to you. In all truth, I do believe you two have what it takes to be amazing detectives, and that there’s something to be found for both of you here.’

Each of them paid more attention to a different part of his reasoning. Dazai was drawn in by the possibility of finding a purpose in life while Chuuya was captivated by the idea of protecting orphans and people. There was one thing that they had in common, though; both were mesmerised by the sincerity in Odasaku’s tone and how he genuinely appeared to have their best interests in mind. They already felt a connection to him, Dazai for their mutual past in the underworld developing into a journey towards the light and Chuuya for their devotion to taking care of orphans.

‘That’s about it for me. If you have any questions, shoot. If not, shall I take you to one of the other detectives?’

‘Yes, please,’ Dazai responded with a gentle smile. Chuuya nodded in agreement. ‘Thank you, Odasaku. That helps a lot.’

‘You’re welcome. Now, I think it’s best that you see our greatest detective in action. I need to ask him for some help, so let’s go.’

Odasaku explained the detective’s ability while the trio sauntered to the office, where they approached the young man who was munching on sweets with his feet on the desk. Neither Dazai nor Chuuya had an outstanding first impression of him, although that was bound to change.

‘Hello, Ranpo.’

‘Hi, Oda! If you need to borrow the most incredible ability in existence, you know the price.’

Odasaku grabbed not one, but two enormous bags of sweets from his desk and laid them on Ranpo’s.

‘Bribe accepted. How may my Super Deduction help?’

‘I need you to locate an ability user.’ He placed a map with markings in front of Ranpo. Noticing that the markings seemed to point at familiar locations, Dazai moved to Ranpo’s side to look at the map. ‘I don’t know the specifics, but the gist of his ability is that it allows him to power up and fly. Last seen yesterday around 1 PM. He’s trying to hide from the government.’

Ranpo put on a pair of glasses and jotted down a cross over a spot on the map. ‘That’s where he is. Be mindful when you approach him, and if you intend to reach him, I suggest you leave within the next five minutes. But that isn’t all you’re here for, is it?’ Odasaku had given him far too many sweets for just a single minor thing like discovering someone’s whereabouts, which gave away that he had more than one reason for coming to Ranpo.

‘No. These two are prospective members of the Agency, but they want to learn more about it before jumping on board. I’ll leave them with you. Thanks again!’

Odasaku rushed out of the office so he could make it to the ability user on time.

Ranpo began to speak in a chirpy tone. ‘Why, the Agency exists to show off my magnificent ability, of course! I’m the world’s greatest detective and this is my scene. If you’re here, you’ll never have to worry about becoming the star of the show since I’ll steal the spotlight!’

Under the obvious narcissism was the subtle hint of a sharp and thoughtful mind. He had just met
them and barely knew the first thing about them from the report Odasaku gave while Chuuya was asleep, but he had figured out what to say to appeal to both teenagers. Dazai did not like responsibility and Chuuya was set on avoiding a repeat of the Sheep’s overdependence on him, denoting that the most appropriate organisation for them was one in which Dazai was not forced into a position of power and Chuuya was not the main combatant. With Ranpo around, neither of those situations were issues. His deduction made those occurrences unnecessary and preventable. Furthermore, everyone else in the Agency was strong and capable in their own way, so overdependence on one single member was unfathomable.

‘You truly are amazing, Ranpo,’ Dazai complimented him with unexpected honesty, which confused Chuuya.

‘See, you’ve already learnt the basics of the Agency! I don’t even need to use Super Deduction to know that both of you would fit right in here.’

Once their conversation with Ranpo finished, they strolled over to the infirmary to talk to Yosano.

‘Here for the dissection already?’ she asked while brandishing the huge knife she had been holding for some reason when she opened the door. ‘I’ve just sharpened my knife, it’s going to cut through you so cleanly when I dissect you!’

Even though she had been speaking to Chuuya, it was Dazai who clarified their motive for coming. ‘Actually, we’re here to ask you for your opinions on the Agency and what made you join it.’

‘You want to hear my thoughts on the Agency? What’s this out of a sudden?’

Dazai continued the explanation. ‘The Special Ability Department’s Director and Odasaku recommended we join the Agency, but whether we agree to join or not isn’t set in stone yet.’

If they joined the Agency, she might be able to coerce the boy with guts into letting himself be dissected more times in the future. In that case… ‘The Agency is the best place on Earth! Join right now!’

‘We’re serious,’ Chuuya said in a stern tone. Then, Yosano let them into the infirmary and sat down, motioning for them to do the same.

‘Let me start at the beginning. During the Great War, I was drafted as a medic due to my ability. Because they had me around, the soldiers lost all sense of self-preservation. As the war went on, I watched more and more soldiers break down mentally, for my ability can only heal physical wounds. No matter how many times I healed them, they always got hurt again, and some took their own lives when their minds couldn’t put up with the fighting anymore. Even though I was supposed to save them, I was the one leading them to their deaths. I wanted to stop using my ability altogether, but my superior was… a cruel doctor, to say the least. In summary, I broke down, so I was placed in an institution for three years after the war ended for trying to explode the ship I was stationed on. My former superior came back for me, but Fukuzawa and Ranpo saved me. I chose to become part of the recently founded Agency exactly because everyone in the Agency is either too strong or too smart for my ability to be necessary. Here, I'm safe from my former superior and I can help people without leading anyone to their death by assuring them that they have my ability on hand.’

Dazai’s eyes widened in realisation. He hoped his conclusion was incorrect for once. ‘…Was that doctor named Mori Ougai, by any chance?’

Yosano stiffened, her expression switching to one of perturbation while her hands dug into her
skirt. ‘Do you know him?’

Dazai nodded sympathetically. ‘I was under his care too. He’s still my legal guardian.’

‘God, that’s horrible.’ Yosano sounded veritably worried. Dissecting Chuuya was the last thing on her mind now. ‘You can’t return to him, and that goes for both of you. Whether you join the Agency or not, it’s not an option, so don’t even consider it.’

Dazai’s voice was uncharacteristically sad when he opened his mouth. ‘I know. Don’t worry, we aren’t planning on going back.’

A silence betraying an unspoken mutual understanding and kinship reigned between the two who had previously been Mori’s wards for a moment. Unable to grasp what they had been through, Chuuya did his best to morph into the background by respecting their silence and not interfering. As curious as he was about their past, he knew better than to pry at the wrong moment.

Afterwards, they had lunch and spent a few hours ruminating on whether they would take up Taneda and Odasaku’s recommendation. They were scheduled to meet Fukuzawa at the end of the workday. During lunch, Dazai informed Chuuya that he confirmed Ranpo had no ability by touching a strand of his hair when he was next to him. Chuuya instantly comprehended why Dazai was so awestruck when Ranpo noted down where the ability user was and shared that feeling.

Dazai did not particularly care whether he became a detective or not, though he was attracted to the ghost of a chance that the Agency might be what he needed. Also, he wanted to spend more time with Odasaku. Besides, the Agency seemed like the kind of place that Chuuya would thrive in. Even so, if Chuuya decided not to become part of the Agency, he would do the same, for he desired to stand by Chuuya most of all.

Chuuya liked the idea of the Armed Detective Agency, albeit he had his doubts since it sounded too good to be true. Above all, the effect of the Sheep’s betrayal persisted. Currently, he was looking for direction. He wanted to uncover what he had lacked as a leader, and in order to assess whether the Agency was suitable for that, he needed to meet up with its president first. On the whole, he was quite fond of the Agency’s work, but he was not prepared to commit yet.

At the time the meeting began, neither of them knew what their decision would be.

‘I’ve heard a lot about you from Oda and Taneda,’ Fukuzawa stated once they introduced themselves. ‘In view of your contribution to the investigation, which I will take as your entrance exam, I’d like to offer you a place at the Armed Detective Agency, under the condition that you pass the written and field tests.’

Now that they knew more about the Agency, its work and its members, it did seem like a reasonable place for them. It was an extremely small organisation, but everyone in it was an elite, so the issue that led to Chuuya being pushed out of the Sheep would not reoccur. Even if the Agency went against the Port Mafia, they would most likely prevail, and they were guaranteed jobs, salaries and accommodation too. In addition, at the Agency, Dazai might discover the meaning of life and Chuuya might get the supportive network he needed to recover from the events with the Sheep. However, they still hesitated a bit.

It was Chuuya who broke the silence. ‘Before I give you my answer… Tell me just one thing: what exactly is the leader of an organisation?’

‘A leader is the one who guides the organisation and who looks after their subordinates. They help their subordinates develop so that they can reach their full potential and will set them back on the
right path if they waiver. They place them in the most appropriate positions without using them for selfish reasons. Whenever they give an order, it’s for the greater good, not for profit or their hidden agenda. They never abandon their subordinates, for they treasure each one of them, care about them and trust them. If necessary, they aren’t afraid to sacrifice themselves, but they would never sacrifice those who put faith in them. For the sake of the organisation, they never force their subordinates to compromise their morals or to endanger themselves uselessly. That is a leader. All for their subordinates’ own good, for the sake of our clients, for this organisation and for the protection of this beloved city.’

Chuuya expression turned into one of wonder and amazement. Fukuzawa's words resonated deep within his heart. ‘I see. That’s what I was missing.’

The biggest thing that Chuuya was missing was the initiative to help the Sheep grow so they could become less dependent on him. Due to that, he lacked the skill of planning where to place them so as to make things easier on everyone as well.

A final aspect which he realised he needed to work on was the strong moral code. He had never forced anyone to do anything, but all along, he had believed that in order to survive, people like him needed to dirty their hands even if it damaged them to the core. That thought got him through all the unpleasant acts he had committed in his life despite the guilt eating away at his conscience. Hearing Fukuzawa’s words, he realised that there was hope, that even a teen with no family like him could survive and rise up in this world without throwing away their morals and doing unspeakable things that left them feeling sick to their stomach.

Due to his environment, he was unaware there was any other option until he got so used to a life of crime that he lacked the will to get out. And so, the only life he had ever known was one of crime and danger, not out of a wish to engage in it, but out of necessity. He had secretly dreamt of a day when he could work and support the Sheep without risking their lives, but no matter how much he thought about it, he could never see that dream becoming true. Now, he could not help the Sheep anymore, albeit he had an opportunity in front of him.

Moreover, he saw a new purpose in life: helping people and protecting the city. Those with power have the responsibility to use it for others. He liked the idea of being able to have a positive impact on people’s lives and protect this city in which the ones he loved lived way more than he could have imagined.

Seeing how Chuuya brightened up as if his inner fire had been reignited gave Dazai his answer. Since Dazai wished to stay around Chuuya to gain insight into the nature of humankind and find a reason to live, he had already decided that he would go along with Chuuya’s choice. When Chuuya turned to Dazai with determined puppy dog eyes, Dazai responded with a soft smile. They did not need words to communicate their decision. Both accepted the offer and were scheduled to take the tests the next day.

The day after they took the written and field tests, Dazai and Chuuya sat on the sofa in the office, awaiting their results. Out of them, Chuuya definitely looked more nervous than Dazai, who just wore his typical impassive and unflappable mask. As they were not allowed to look at their test results lest they got in, someone else had to go check if the results were available yet. That someone was Odasaku, who went to pester Fukuzawa about them as soon as he arrived at the office.
‘It’s Oda, sir,’ his voice rang from behind the door.

‘Come in.’

Odasaku entered the president’s office. He really hoped that both Dazai and Chuuya passed the tests. They had proven their suitability for the Armed Detective Agency when they risked their lives during the investigation, and even if they did not pass, he could not just leave two orphans on the run from the mafia on their own. ‘How did the boys fare on the tests?’ he asked expectantly.

Fukuzawa picked up four files from the pile next to him, two on the written exam and two on the field exam. He placed them in front of Odasaku.

‘Does that mean…?’

‘Yes. Let’s go tell everyone.’

Fukuzawa got up and left the room, Odasaku following right behind him. The temperature suddenly dropped a few degrees the moment Fukuzawa exited his office. Yosano was also out of the infirmary, eager to hear the outcome of the tests. She did not know the boys well, but she already liked them quite a bit, not to mention that no one deserved to remain under Mori’s influence and she wanted more specimens to dissect anyway. Even the office workers switched their gaze from their computers to the president. Everyone except for Dazai and Ranpo was jittery.

By far the most anxious of them all was Chuuya. Having gained a newfound respect for Fukuzawa and a new purpose, he truly wished to join the Armed Detective Agency and do everything in his power to protect it and the city.

‘Everyone, I have an announcement.’ Upon hearing Fukuzawa’s words, all the Agency members ceased what they were doing and gave him their full attention. Chuuya felt as if his heart was stuck in his throat and his lungs forgot how to breathe.

‘As you’re already aware, Dazai and Chuuya sat their written and field tests yesterday. I’m pleased to let you know that on top of passing the entrance exam, both of them got full marks on the tests, so as of today, Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuuya are detectives of the Armed Detective Agency. I expect you all to treat them well.’

Chuuya exhaled in relief. A proud sincere smile showed up on his face unintentionally, the sparkle in his eyes shining even brighter than before. Dazai could not suppress a cheerful smile of his own, though he was smiling at how joyful Chuuya was more than at the thought of joining the Agency. Yosano was so glad that the boys were now part of the Agency that she hurried over to them. Even Ranpo seemed to approve of Fukuzawa’s choice. The previously tense atmosphere turned into one of elation and excitement that was as warm as the birth of a new star.

‘Oda,’ Fukuzawa started, eyes fixed on him.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘As the one who recommended them to the Agency, you will be their mentor.’

Dazai’s grin widened visibly the moment he heard that. If Odasaku was their mentor, that gave him an excuse to befriend him, which worked out impeccably. Chuuya was thankful that Odasaku was put in charge of them too, for he believed he had quite a bit to learn about fighting from Odasaku.

‘Of course. I’ll do my best to guide them and set a good example.’
'Thank you, I’m counting on you.’ Then, he turned towards the pair whose visages gave away how jubilant and stunned they were more than they would have liked to admit. ‘Welcome to the Armed Detective Agency.’

The detectives gathered around Dazai and Chuuya. Predictably, Odasaku was the first one to congratulate them. ‘Well done and welcome to the Agency. I look forward to working with you.’

‘So do I,’ Dazai and Chuuya replied in perfect synchrony.

Next up was Yosano, who was even happier than when Chuuya agreed to let her dissect him. ‘Welcome, boys! I can’t wait to treat you.’

This time, Chuuya spoke first. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’d rather not be treated, but thanks.’

Ranpo took his sixth lollipop of the day out of his mouth to speak. ‘Congratulations. It’s great to have more people who can bring me sweets and take the boring cases I don’t care about so I can focus my ultimate Super Deduction on the interesting ones.’

As he watched the two boys who had aced the entrance tests like no one else had ever done before being welcomed into the Agency with more enthusiasm than anyone else had ever been, Fukuzawa was reminded of a sentence he heard years ago.

*Only a diamond can polish a diamond.*

‘Natsume, those words you told me and Mori back then… I’m going to find out if you were correct. And in doing so, I will do what I can to ensure they reach their brightest shine.’

Later, the Agency threw a party for their newest members. It was not the craziest party in history since everyone except for Fukuzawa and Odasaku was underage, so there was no alcohol involved, but everyone enjoyed themselves and got to know each other better. They discovered that they had several things in common, for example their love of sweets, literature and cats. Dazai got to hang out with Odasaku and Ranpo while Chuuya was more preoccupied with Yosano and Fukuzawa, though by the end of the night, everyone had had at least a few conversations with everyone else, not that they had any way of escaping that when they played games together and shared cat pics, food pics and memes in the Agency group chat. On that night, the beginning of the new and improved Armed Detective Agency was marked.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, the compassionate leader who believed everyone deserved a second chance. Edogawa Ranpo, the childish genius detective that nothing could get past. Yosano Akiko, the sadistic doctor who treasured life above all else. Oda Sakunosuke, the kind former assassin with no ulterior motives. And now, the eccentric prodigy Dazai Osamu and the unbeatable powerhouse Nakahara Chuuya. Together, they made up the Armed Detective Agency.

Their new family.

**Chapter End Notes**

Oh, look, Soukoku have finally joined the ADA! Only took me 50000 words… It is time for the main story to begin from here onwards. Massive thank you to all of you
darlings for putting up with the wait! <3

Fun fact:
Dazai getting full marks on the written and field tests to join the ADA is canon (source: Untold Origins novel), but I do not think Chuuya would fare any worse on them, hence why they both got full marks.

Unpopular opinion: Ango’s ability is underrated. It may not be flashy or strong, but the more I think about it, the cooler it gets. He can learn everything about an object and potentially even about a person with a single touch. Imagine how easy that makes every single investigation with Ango on the team! Just give him a piece of evidence (e.g. the victim’s clothes, a strand of hair or a piece of paper) and there you go, you got your case solved, and you have enough proof to back it up in court. How cool is that? It is practically the perfect ability for a detective or for an intelligence officer.
Dazai and Chuuya’s glee at joining the Armed Detective Agency quickly dampened. Initially, they were supposed to live in the Agency dormitory once they gathered the last things they had to take out of the hideout Dazai had arranged for them. However, after getting more noise complaints about them arguing and fighting in the three days they had spent there before joining the Agency than Fukuzawa believed possible, he decreed that they would live in a house close to the Agency rather than in the dorm.

‘Why do I have to live with this arsehole?’ Chuuya asked while uselessly trying to conceal his anger out of respect for Fukuzawa.

‘I don’t want to live with a rabid sheepdog either,’ Dazai declared in an irate tone. ‘Can’t I live with Odasaku instead? We can just build a doghouse for Chuuya.’

‘Hah?! How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a dog? I’ll beat you up next time you say that!’

‘Oh, but you are! You’re my dog for life, remember?’

Fukuzawa let out a deep sigh. He was extremely thankful he had years of parenting experience and dealing with teenagers under his belt now. ‘No fighting, please. Listen, we can’t let you two live separately with no one else around when the Port Mafia might still come after you, but we also can’t endanger the other detectives. It’s safer for you to stick together.’

All of the detectives lived in the dorms, so living with them was out of the question, but the risk that the mafia might murder or capture the other detectives if they lived with the boys was too significant to ignore, which left renting a house just for them as the only option. Chuuya could protect them both, and if necessary, he could unleash his full power as long as Dazai was around, so having them live alone was the optimal course of action. Fukuzawa was not particularly fond of letting two teenagers live on their own, so he ensured Odasaku would look after them and drop by occasionally to monitor them. No one could contradict that decision, especially not the teens he was trying to protect.

‘In case it wasn’t clear, since you have become detectives of the Armed Detective Agency, I expect you to represent us accordingly and not to be at each other’s throats. You aren’t allowed to fight each other; instead, sort your issues out through more peaceful means. Do you understand?’

The two mumbled a discontent and unenthusiastic affirmation, then turned around with a huff and crossed their arms, reflecting each other’s position by accident. Fukuzawa supposed that was the best he could hope for momentarily. They would get along better with time, he reasoned.

‘Good. I’m going to let you unpack and settle in. If there are any problems, let me know.’

And then, they were roommates.

Or, well, housemates. The Lord had a semblance of mercy, for they had their own rooms. Had they had to share a bed again, they would probably have burnt the place down.

Thus, the chaotic and messy disaster otherwise known as putting Dazai and Chuuya within vicinity...
Throughout their first week at the Agency, they integrated swiftly and got along well with their co-workers. Odasaku was an excellent and patient mentor to them, Yosano hit it off with Chuuya instantly and developed a peaceful relationship based on mutual understanding of their past hardships with Dazai, Ranpo was his usual narcissistic but endearing self and Fukuzawa was a strong and caring leader who was both kind and firm enough to earn Chuuya’s respect. Dazai slacked off and tried to pass his work on to others (mostly to Chuuya) all the time, and while that irritated Chuuya, Odasaku did not mind helping him out while Yosano and Ranpo were unaffected by his antics. He was truly blessed to have a mentor like Odasaku and a partner like Chuuya.

Once they joined, they started hanging out with their co-workers after work and messaging them relatively often. Dazai shamelessly spammed Odasaku with so many messages which bordered on nonsense that it was surreal while Chuuya slowly but surely got closer to Yosano, first by talking about mandatory or work-related things before moving on to more conversational chatter. Yosano was quite keen to get to know Chuuya as well, for during the dissection session, Chuuya earnt her approval by becoming the first person to have ever survived Yosano’s ‘treatment’ six times in a row with no breaks without wincing in pain, and while holding a conversation in the meantime too. As for Ranpo, who had chaperoned them on their first case after they joined the Agency, both boys had shown they possessed impressive investigative skills, so he grew to like them, even if they were nowhere near his genius detective level. It did help that Chuuya brought delicious homemade cake to the office as a ‘thank you for having me’ gift to the Agency on his first day, which was appreciated by everyone.

In addition, they started martial arts lessons with Odasaku so they could learn how to protect themselves better without using their abilities or firearms. During the lessons, Odasaku’s fighting prowess and amazing teaching skills were more than enough to impress Chuuya, awakening the wish to learn from him and become as much of a devoted, strong and morally upright detective as Odasaku. As detectives, they were given stun guns, for murdering people was out of the question lest they were given special permission to do so. Whether they were permitted to resort to lethal force or not, it would not have mattered to Chuuya, for he embraced a version of Odasaku’s attitude of not killing and swore to himself that he would not kill unless he had exhausted all of his options and there was no other way out.

Even Fukuzawa did his best to accommodate them. He put up with all of Dazai’s shenanigans, did not scold them when he got more noise complaints about their arguments and checked up on them often.

Overall, their life at the Armed Detective Agency was going smoothly. Not only were their co-workers and boss lovely, the work was also enjoyable and Mori had not sent anyone after them.

Nevertheless, there was still something that prevented Dazai from feeling at ease. He had the records about Arahabaki, but he had yet to tell Chuuya about them, and concealing them was getting harder by the day. His intention was to wait for Chuuya to recover a bit from the Sheep’s betrayal before dumping what was possibly more emotional trauma on him. Out of consideration for Chuuya’s privacy, Dazai had not leafed through the papers, but he did not need to do so in order to guess that their content was far from pleasant.

Luckily, Chuuya seemed to adapt very quickly. The Agency and his newfound devotion to
protecting the city and helping people aided him in getting back up on his feet fast. He was a fighter and not even something as hurtful as betrayal was enough to defeat him. With the Agency around, recuperating after the hectic turn his life took became easier.

If Dazai hid the files from Chuuya any longer, he risked losing the bond of trust which they had begun to build. Moreover, if the Port Mafia came by and tried to convince Chuuya to join them in exchange for the files, that would be the end of it, and the past ten days would have been for nothing. Not to mention that if their trust and faith in each other reached a comfortable level before Dazai told Chuuya he had the files, the moment he revealed the existence of the files, the amount of trust Chuuya had in him would decrease, and Chuuya would be reluctant to believe him and have faith in him in the future. In other words, he had to take action and inform Chuuya about the Arahabaki files in his possession as soon as possible.

Dazai could not just shove the documents down Chuuya’s throat with no preparation whatsoever, though. Doing so could jeopardise Chuuya’s mental health since his mental state was still a bit fragile due to the Sheep’s betrayal, so he had to be careful about how he went about this.

When they finished work on Friday, Dazai and Chuuya had some training with Odasaku, then returned home as usual. They lived a mere five-minute walk away, so it did not take long to get back. After they arrived, Dazai walked to the kitchen and commenced taking out ingredients from the fridge and cupboard. He did not know how to ease Chuuya into the files so as to limit their influence on him, but bearing in mind how Chuuya cooked for him to cheer him up previously, he reckoned that mimicking said action was bound to have the intended effect on Chuuya too. People tend to do things which would make them happy to other people in order to make them happy, after all.

Chuuya watched him with a mix of surprise, suspicion and concern. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m making dinner for us,’ Dazai replied with a cheerful closed eyes smile.

Chuuya could not believe he had just heard Dazai say that. He had not seen him cook a single time since they met, and they kept their food separate most of the time so far. ‘…Are you okay?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘You don’t even cook for yourself, let alone for me.’

‘Don’t say that, I do things for you all the time!’

‘No, you don’t.’

‘Yes, I do!’

‘Like what?’

Dazai could not produce an answer.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Chuuya grinned victoriously.

Still, the idea of Dazai preparing him dinner made Chuuya feel bad. Guilt always nagged at his conscience whenever anyone did something for him. He was accustomed to being the one doing stuff for others, not to have others do stuff for him. That is how it was in the Sheep, hence why he found things being the other way around for once strange. ‘You don’t have to make dinner for me too, you know?’
‘Consider it payback for making dinner that one time over a month ago.’

‘If you say so.’ Chuuya was still sceptical, but he was tired and not in the mood to do anything, so he let Dazai off the hook. ‘What are you cooking?’

Dazai gave him a wide smile. ‘Your family.’

He was making shrimp tempura.

‘Ha ha, very funny, dickhead,’ Chuuya responded sarcastically. He decided to cook mackerel and takoyaki the next day just to parrot Dazai’s sentence.

Dazai purposefully ignored the sarcasm. ‘I know, I’m hilarious, unlike a certain elementary schooler I could name.’

‘Hadn’t I wanted to avoid wasting food, I would’ve taken that pan off the stove and smashed your face in with it.’

‘Wow, you’re so mean! Is that any way to talk to someone who’s being nice enough to make you dinner?’

‘I didn’t ask you to do anything. You can shove your food up your arse and I can make my own dinner for all I care.’

‘But I want Chuuya to taste my marvellous cooking! I bet it’s better than his.’

‘That’s a bet you’re sure to lose.’

‘We won’t know unless you try it, will we?’ Truth to be told, he knew Chuuya outmatched him in terms of cooking skills, but if Dazai planned for Chuuya to be calm and able to take the news about the files shall he choose to read them straight away, he did not want him to exhaust his energy until then. Chuuya needed as much mental fortitude as possible for this, after all.

‘Alright, I’ll try your shitty cooking, and I’ll make sure to tell you all the things you did wrong with it.’

Dazai beamed merrily in response. ‘I look forward to it!’

Half an hour later, the shrimp tempura and hotpot were ready. Chuuya was baffled by how Dazai thought it reasonable to cook hotpot in hot weather, but he was not one to look a given horse in the mouth, so he did not complain. They dug in and ate in silence.

It was not the best homemade meal Chuuya had ever had, but it was not bad. The food might not have been better than his own, but it was marginally better than expected, which was passable.

‘What does the small and mighty chef think of tonight’s dinner?’ Dazai inquired after they finished eating.

‘The shrimp tempura is a bit overcooked and the hotpot tastes too much like MSGs. In the future, remove the shrimp a minute or two earlier and use less Ajinomoto. It isn’t the worst meal ever, though.’

‘So you like it?’ Dazai had an excited sparkle in his eyes as he looked at Chuuya with an expectant smile.

‘…I guess I don’t dislike it.’
A relieved smile appeared on his face. ‘Thank goodness! I was worried that you might not like the dish in general.’

Chuuya crinkled an eyebrow. It was peculiar that Dazai did anything for once, let alone that he did it for someone else and that he hoped said person would like it. His mistrust was through the roof and Dazai made it worse. ‘You could’ve just asked.’

‘But then, I would’ve lost the element of surprise! The surprise makes it taste better, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘I can’t argue with that.’

They chattered about little nothings for the next hour to let the food settle and for Chuuya to wind down a bit more. When Dazai deemed that Chuuya was relaxed and tranquil enough to stomach the news about the files, he brought up the subject.

‘Chuuwa…’ Dazai began in a serious raspy voice.

If there was one thing Chuuya had learnt since he met Dazai, it was that if he did not sound like a buffoon, it was time to worry. ‘Yes?’

‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while,’ he spoke as his eyes bore into Chuuya’s.

Chuuya’s heart beat faster and blood rushed to his head. Whether it was out of panic or the beginning of a blush was a mystery to him. ‘Shoot.’

‘I’m warning you, what I’m about to say might have a huge negative effect on you.’

Oh, great. Chuuya did not like where this was going. He could not picture what shit he had got them into. Taking in a deep breath, he steeled his heart and prepared for the worst. ‘All the more reason for you to tell me, then.’

Dazai was wary of how Chuuya would react, for he clearly underestimated the impact what they were about to discuss would have on him. He hesitated for a second, but he conceded because it was better to get this out of the way now rather than wait any longer. ‘Remember Rimbaud’s files on Arahabaki?’

Chuuya became more alert in an instant. Anxiety was already racking through his brain. ‘What about them?’

‘When I told you everything Rimbaud owned was flung into the ocean, it wasn’t the full truth. Mori ordered me to lie, most likely so he could control you with what I had to hide from you. In reality, there was one thing which the Port Mafia salvaged from his belongings.’

His eyes widened in realisation as his voice rose by an octave. ‘The files?!”

‘Exactly.’

‘And you’re only telling me now?’ Chuuya yelled as he punched the table to prevent himself from punching Dazai. ‘What the fuck were you waiting for?’

‘I waited for things to stabilise so that you didn’t have to go through more successive traumas than the ones which happened in that short time period after we were reunited.’
To say that Chuuya was seething with fury was an understatement. While he could appreciate Dazai’s attempt to be thoughtful, he had been with the Port Mafia for a few hours, and had he known about the files’ existence in those hours, he could have stolen them. ‘Well, thanks, jerk. Now, I need to go back and retrieve them, and it’s all your fault!’

‘Ah, don’t jump to such rash conclusions! Do you actually think I didn’t take that into account when I asked you to leave the mafia with me?’

The ginger had to admit that Dazai had a point. He was not the type to plot anything without accounting for everything beforehand, although that did not guarantee that he would care enough about Chuuya to do something about the files before quitting the mafia. ‘It’s a possibility.’

‘Fortunately for you, I foresaw that you would react like this, so I copied the files and put them in the hideout days before we left. Give me a second and I’ll be back.’

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘To get the files,’ Dazai replied while en route to his room. He emerged out of his bedroom a few seconds later with several thick folders. ‘I have the documents right here.’

‘Have you –’

‘No, I haven’t read them. It’s your past, so whether I learn the content of the files or not is your choice, not mine.’

Astonishment showed up on Chuuya’s face. Given what a nuisance Dazai was, he had assumed that he would give zero fucks about his privacy and browse through the files without his permission, if only to obtain potential blackmail material. Maybe Dazai was not as disrespectful and inconsiderate as he originally thought.

Meanwhile, Dazai was too busy with his unnerving theatrics, making Chuuya recall why he hated the guy in the first place. ‘I have to say, though, they were such a piece of work to get. I had to go through so much hassle for them that I’d prefer never to experience anything like that again, especially not for your sake.’

‘Thank you.’ The honest appreciation in Chuuya’s voice could not be ignored. True, he might not like Dazai, but he did show gratefulness when it was deserved, and as prideful as he was, he was not so prideful that he could not apologise or thank anyone.

‘I’m impressed, it seems you do know when gratitude is due,’ Dazai teased with a gentle smile.

‘Of course I do! Do you think I’m some kind of uncivilised ogre who lived in a swamp all his life or something?’

‘You’re a slug, so that’s not entirely inaccurate.’

‘Cut it out, mackerel, I don’t have time for your crap right now. I’m gonna’ use my time more wisely and go read the files,’ Chuuya announced while grabbing the files and getting up.

When Chuuya started making his way to his room, Dazai interjected. All traces of mockery had vanished. ‘Before you go, there’s one last thing I must say.’

‘Go ahead.’

Dazai walked over to Chuuya and put a hand on Chuuya’s shoulder so as to soothe him, his tone
softening to get his point across. ‘If you feel uncomfortable at any point, it’s okay to stop. It’s evident you’ve been waiting for this moment your entire life, but that doesn’t mean you have to get through them all in one go. They’ll still be here tomorrow. No one is going to take them away from you.’

Up until then, he had been making eye contact with Chuuya, but when he voiced the last sentence, he did so with a sideways glance, as if trying to block any attempt to look into his heart. ‘And don’t forget I’m here, too. I’m bored anyway, so if you wish to talk or distract yourself with a game or something afterwards, it isn’t like I can come up with something more fun to do right now.’ Unlike Dazai, Chuuya was an extrovert, so talking through his emotions and thoughts with somebody could be helpful.

Had Chuuya not been too focused on the files, he might have sat Dazai down for a talk, for Dazai was being abnormally compassionate. For a second, he sensed worry in his voice, leading him to briefly consider that Dazai may not have hated him as much as he claimed, but he ruled that out as an option from the get-go and opted to overlook his comportment for now. ‘Understood. You better let me be if I’m not in the mood to put up with your bullshit, though.’

‘Will do.’

Chuuya retreated into his room. He pored over the documents for hours, each of them worse than the previous one. The only non-negative fact he discovered in the files was that he had French citizenship through his mother, which explained his foreign-looking features and why he could speak French. For the next two nights, he could not sleep, nor could he do much besides lie down in bed and attempt not to cry and shake with rage at the horrifying events in his childhood. As awful as it might sound, he was glad that he killed everyone in that military facility when Rimbaud released him. The terrible things he had read and the memories they triggered kept him awake until he forced himself into an unrestful sleep so he could get to work on time on Monday.

Dazai had barely seen Chuuya all weekend. Chuuya did mention that he might not wish to see him, so Dazai did not randomly burst into his room like he had done ever since they moved into their new house. He desired to check up on him, but not having much experience with kids his age and relationships of any form in general, he had no idea where to draw the line between respecting someone’s wishes and being there for someone, resulting in him keeping his distance. The next time they had a conversation which lasted more than a minute, it was when they were assigned a case at work.

During that conversation, it was painfully obvious that Chuuya was not in high spirits. Details that he would ordinarily latch on to immediately went right over his head, he was less talkative, his investigative skills were not at their sharpest, he appeared to be up in the clouds most of the time and his hot-headedness was all but gone. Dazai had never thought that he would miss seeing Chuuya’s temper get out of control or that he would prefer Chuuya to insult or threaten him whenever he teased him. It was not that he had become calmer, for he had not; rather, he seemed too miserable to even be himself.

‘Hey, Odasaku, Ango,’ Dazai grumbled in a whiny voice as he lowered his head onto the bar, not letting go of his drink. After work, he had gone for drinks with Odasaku and Ango without Fukuzawa’s knowledge, as he had done several times in the two weeks he had spent in the Agency. Well, Fukuzawa knew they were hanging out, just not that alcohol was involved. Odasaku allowed
him to drink in order not to be a hypocrite since he had been a drinker at his age too. Besides, if Dazai was drinking, as his mentor, his goal was to ensure that he at least drank within acceptable limits with adult supervision around. He knew teenagers would most likely still drink alcohol even if they were told not to do so, after all. Ango could not breathe a word of this to anyone due to also being underage.

‘Is something the matter?’ Ango asked while Odasaku put his glass down.

‘I need advice.’

Odasaku’s mentor instincts were summoned in an instant. ‘What happened?’

‘If someone told you they might need time alone, but then they avoid everything and everyone for days and don’t act like their normal self, what would you do? Would you stay away to respect their privacy or intrude at the risk of overstepping your boundaries?’

Ango thought for a few seconds before replying. ‘That depends on whether something occurred or not and how long the strange behaviour goes on for. If it’s for just one day, I wouldn’t worry much lest it’s a direct consequence of something horrible, but the longer it takes, the more worrisome it is.’

‘What if it’s been three days?’

‘If it’s been three days, it might be time to start worrying, though it might still not be anything severe.’

Odasaku, who had been listening in attentively so far, intervened. ‘This is about Chuuya, isn’t it?’

‘I can’t get anything past you, can I, Odasaku?’

‘Not with how odd he was at work today.’

‘You noticed, eh?’

‘Everyone noticed. You saw that Ranpo didn’t force Chuuya to bring him sweets, Yosano paid extra attention to him during lunch and Fukuzawa told him to take it easy and ask for help if need be, didn’t you?’

‘Obviously.’

‘Why don’t you ask him? I may not know him as well as you two do, but even I can tell he’s honest and resilient. If he’s been acting weird, you should probably check up on him just to make sure he’s fine.’

Odasaku nodded in agreement. ‘Ango is right. In a worst-case scenario, he’s gonna’ tell you to drop it and that’s it. Use your best judgment so you don’t push him too much, though. If there’s any way I can help, don’t hesitate to contact me.’

‘Thank you both,’ Dazai smiled at them before sighing and faceplanting back onto the bar. ‘Ah, he’s so troublesome. Why do I have to look after the shrimp? I’m really not looking forward to it…’

‘I can talk to him instead if you’d rather have it that way,’ Odasaku offered.

As appreciative as Dazai was of Odasaku’s solicitude, he could not let him take over in this
situation. No one in the Agency knew the truth about Chuuya’s origins. Whether Chuuya was willing to share the content of the files with the only person who knew he was Arahabaki’s vessel was questionable to begin with, so he could not imagine him being any more willing to discuss them with someone who was still in the dark. Odasaku was awesome and would be kind about it, but Dazai somehow found it hard to believe that Chuuya would share that information so readily when he did not even tell his friends of eight years about his real motive for investigating Arahabaki. Therefore, Dazai had to be the one who spoke with Chuuya.

‘I do appreciate the thought, Odasaku, but there’s no need for that. I can handle him.’

‘Feel free to call or text if need be.’

‘I’ll also be around if I can be of any use,’ Ango seconded.

‘I might have to take up on your offers.’

The trio continued drinking and chatting for another hour. The next day was a workday, so none of them got drunk. Dazai would absolutely have got blackout drunk had he been on his own on any other day, but Odasaku was there to keep him in check, if only until the weekend, and he had other plans for the night.

Dazai had decided to confront Chuuya about his recent mood. He only cared because it was hindering the investigation. The chance of Chuuya going back to his typical energetic self subsequently was most definitely not a reason why he made that choice.

When he got home, Dazai went straight to Chuuya’s room after dropping his things off and changing into more comfortable clothes. Chuuya came out dressed in the dog onesie Dazai had bought him on the first night they spent together.

Dazai could not suppress an amused sneer and the urge to tease him at the sight. ‘Nice to see you did like the onesie in the end! I knew I made an exceptional choice when I picked it. It looks great on you.’

‘Why the hell are you bothering me?’ His voice sounded like a mix between resignation and being mentally drained. Normally, he would have retorted, but today was not one of his normal days.

‘Mind if I come in?’

‘Yes.’

‘I just want to speak to you for a bit.’

‘Not interested unless it’s about work.’

‘Please?’ Dazai looked at him with pleading puppy dog eyes. Chuuya was almost persuaded by the unexpected innocence in that look, but he knew better than to forfeit when Dazai asks for something. When that was not enough to make Chuuya give in, he wrapped himself around his arm and looked at him even more insistently, planning to piss Chuuya off until he gave up.

‘Let go of me, you octopus!’ He shook his arm to no avail, for Dazai remained stuck to him like
‘You know what to do if you want me to let go!’ Dazai stated with his usual silly joking tone.

‘I don’t want to!’

‘Then, I don’t want to let go.’

They stood in an awkward standstill for a moment until Chuuya facepalmed with his free arm and groaned. He did not feel like seeing anyone, much less his annoying mackerel of a housemate, but he was aware that he could not win and wished to get whatever shit Dazai was on about over with already, so he figured he might as well play along sooner rather than later. ‘Ugh, come in, bastard.’

Dazai did not release Chuuya’s arm until they were both inside the room. Once free, Chuuya sat on the bed, leaving Dazai to sit on the revolving chair at his desk.

‘You better talk before I change my mind.’

‘We haven’t seen each other much for the past few days, so I’m just checking up on you. How are you?’ His voice was a tad too serious for the question to be a classic run-of-the-mill question, which told Chuuya what he was referring to indirectly.

Chuuya turned away and stiffened slightly. He was uncomfortable with the potential double meaning of his words, so he wilfully ignored the hidden meaning and spoke in an informal manner in hopes that their dialogue will take a less distressing direction. ‘I’m alright. How about you?’

‘Fine as always. This isn’t about me, though.’

Putting his guard up, Chuuya replied in an unyielding decisive manner. ‘If that question is all you came here for, I ask that you leave.’

‘Not yet. You haven’t answered my question truthfully, after all.’

Chuuya’s heart rate sped up and he stifled a gulp as the memories of what he had read three days prior resurfaced. The gruesome experiments made his stomach churn so badly that it would be a miracle if he managed to sleep tonight. Worst of all, they served as a reminder that he was not a regular human like everyone else, that he was meant to be a container for a destructive force rather than a person in his own right, which hurt more than his disgust at the research he was at the centre of.

‘Allow me to quote you: “Listen, I can tell you’re not okay”. I’m not stupid enough to believe you when you’re claiming to be okay despite not being so either.’

Those lines reminded Chuuya that fooling Dazai was impossible. He had to find another way to get him off his back, hence why he tried to appeal to his logic by making the discussion seem pointless. ‘You’d just laugh or poke fun at me if I told you, so there’s no point in saying anything.’

‘Wow, such harsh words! You must really think the worst of me… My feelings are hurt.’

Theatrically, he brought a hand to his forehead and put the other one over his heart.

‘You don’t have feelings.’

‘You aren’t completely wrong, but I’m still offended. Give me a chance, will you? I promise I won’t laugh or make fun of you.’
Chuuya paused for a moment, then sighed. If he did not blab, Dazai would figure it out and find out the truth one way or another. Besides, he did need to let it all out, and since Dazai knew about the existence of what was on his mind, unlike the others, he decided he might as well vent to Dazai instead of involving other people. ‘Geez, fine. I swear, if you laugh or start making jabs at me like the annoying piece of shit you are, I’m punching you into the next city.’

‘You won’t have to, I’m certain. Now, tell me, what’s bothering you, shorty?’

Unable to look Dazai in the eye, his gaze switched to the floor. Each word that came out of his mouth took more effort than usual, not just because he attempted to mask his anxiety and sadness so that Dazai did not catch on to how affected he was, but also due to the nature of the conversation itself. ‘It’s about the files.’

Dazai had a goofy grin on his face. ‘Yep, I guessed as much.’

Chuuya’s temper broke out of its confines for a second. ‘Why did you ask, then?’

His smile disappeared, leaving behind a stern expression. ‘Because that’s all I guessed. I don’t know what’s in the files, so I can’t draw any further inference. That’s why I need you to tell me what exactly is on your mind.’

After taking a deep breath, Chuuya closed his eyes for a moment to sort through his thoughts and mentally prepare himself for the gruelling conversation. There were so many things going through his mind, but phrasing them was very difficult. Even though he was a child like any other in the beginning, the doubt those experiments cast on him regarding his own human nature gnawed at him constantly. Who he was now was different to who he was back then, so had he lost what made him human in the process? If he could not be categorised as such anymore, then what was he? Chuuya had believed that he found a purpose at the Agency, but his purpose had already been set in stone years prior. Given that he could not control part of his ability, did he really have the capability to go against what he was supposed to be? If not, attempting to find another purpose in life besides being a deadly weapon was aimless and destined to be fruitless, so his efforts were all in vain. Chuuya hated that thought, but he was unable to vanquish it.

‘Basically, I was… a test subject.’ His tone started off cool-headed and straightforward, but gradually, more of his rare vulnerability showed itself. ‘Not gonna’ go into details since they’re sickening, but if you wanna’ know, I don’t mind if you read the files later. They intended to create an artificial gifted and they succeeded. Originally, I was a regular human, but whether that’s the case after merging with Arahabaki is debatable.’ He stopped for a second to take in a calming breath. ‘Which makes me wonder, to what extent am I still human? Can I even be called human anymore? Am I just… a vessel?’

The pain amplified with each word. Thinking those sentences was one thing, but articulating his fears and insecurity brought them to life. By the time he was done, his voice and hands were quivering, and he could not determine whether it was out of wrath or sorrow.

Dazai moved to take a seat next to Chuuya on the bed. ‘Chuuya, do you know my ability’s name?’

‘Eraserhead?’

‘No Longer Human.’

‘That’s harsh.’

Dazai giggled before facing Chuuya. ‘Perhaps, but that isn’t what I’m on about. What I’m trying to
say by telling you my ability’s name is that it’s okay if you aren’t human. I can’t exactly claim to be one either; I lost the right to call myself ‘human’ long ago. Maybe I never even had it. Yet, you’re still more human than I’ll ever be. To me, you’re more human than most people I’ve met in my life, which is part of what drew me to you in the first place. As someone disqualified from being human, I’m not one to talk, but my point is that just as Rimbaud told you, even after merging with Arahabaki, you’re human. Most people would have given up on their humanity and gone mad with power, but you? You didn’t. You held on to your humanity and subjugated a God of Destruction through sheer willpower and inner strength alone. How incredible is that?” Admiration appeared into his tone, his eyes adopting a look of pure childlike awe which accentuated his soft features.

Chuuya stared at Dazai, wearing an astounded expression. He could never have imagined that Dazai truly thought that, but above all, he acknowledged that Dazai was right. Rimbaud’s words replayed in his head. Just as Rimbaud suspected, he did start off as a distinct being from Arahabaki. With Dazai confirming that Chuuya was still very much human to the extent that he found it noteworthy upon meeting him, he might be able to grow to consider himself incontrovertibly human over time.

Too bad Dazai just had to ruin the atmosphere. ‘Honestly, it’s impressive that you could do that when you’re so tiny and can’t use your brain.’

Usually, Chuuya would have been so infuriated that he would have threatened Dazai, and albeit he could not deny that he was a bit annoyed at the comment, he was too invigorated by the reassurance that he was still human to care.

Ditching the jabs and insults, Dazai continued in a casual tone. ‘Either way, whether you’re human or not doesn’t bother me in the slightest. Even if you aren’t, that’s fine, because neither am I. If required, we can learn to be human together. Not that you need to; you’ve already succeeded in staying human despite becoming one with something inhuman, which proves how strong and utterly human you are.’

He took Chuuya's hands into his own and intertwined their fingers while looking him in the eye with a kind smile. ‘Will you join me on my journey to learn to be human, Chuuya? I need someone who’s human to the core to show me the way, and I can’t think of someone better for that than you.’

Seeing the sincere gaze threw Chuuya off. He had presumed that someone as callous and unemotional as Dazai would scoff or laugh at his feelings, that he would tell him to toughen up or that he would not care in the slightest. All along, he kept searching for hints of dishonesty or manipulation, but all he could find was candour and warmth. He would not say it in a thousand years, but the genuine acceptance in Dazai’s words had touched his heart. Whether he was human or not, there would always be one person who did not care, somebody who would not desert him if his God side overtook his human side. Even if those words were lies, he wanted them to be true, for he desired to believe in his own humanity. Yet, he chose to trust his instincts and trust Dazai this time.

A self-assured smirk showed up on his face. If everything Dazai just said was the truth and Dazai was always right, then he could not argue against his verdict, so his certainty that he was his own person instead of a mere vessel grew. At that moment, he made up his mind: he would fight to demonstrate he was not an abomination if he had to. Never will he ever give in and resign himself to the fate others picked for him back when he could not defend himself. He felt far from the black nothingness known as Arahabaki, like an individual who existed separately to the god inside of him. Arahabaki may have been part of him, but it was not who he was. He was Nakahara Chuuya,
a human who was one of the strongest ability users in existence, and if anyone could not wrap their head around that notion, he could teach them that with his fists. Such people were undeserving of his attention anyway.

With that in mind, he reasoned that agreeing to help Dazai on his journey could not hurt, for along the way, he could also prove himself. ‘Yeah, I will.’

For the rest of the night, the two boys watched films and played games together, which went well with the mackerel and takoyaki cooked by Chuuya. Neither of them slept until the early hours of the morning; not because of angst or despondence, but because they were too preoccupied with enjoying each other’s company.

Two weeks later, Chuuya had recovered from learning about his past for the most part. Rimbaud’s words and Dazai solidified his confidence in the fact that he was human. The Agency helped a lot as well. He liked to think he had become good friends with everyone, although out of all of them, there was one person whom he got along with better than he could ever have hoped.

That respective person had brought him along for a shopping session on a Saturday. Yosano needed his help to carry all of her bags. His ability was perfect for such a task and he was more than happy to comply since using his ability was no big deal to him and he was planning on going out with her more anyway.

There was another reason why he accompanied her, though. Yosano had invited him to spend the evening with her and her best friend at her best friend’s place. At least once a week, Yosano and her best friend met up to catch up, and this week, she wanted Chuuya there too, which made Chuuya feel a giddy sense of joy. Almost everything they were buying was for the small party. He had never met Yosano’s best friend before, but Yosano assured him that they would get along well and she was not the type to say such things lest they were true, so he was not worried. Instead, he was so excited that he had looked forward to the hangout all week. The same could be said for Yosano too.

Once they dropped off the things they did not need for the party at the Agency dormitory, they set off for their destination.

Ten minutes passed and a cosy house with a magnificent garden that stood out from afar came into view. Flowers of all kinds were ordered by size and colour, resembling a tasteful burst of colour as they formed ornate shapes. Chuuya was amazed by how well kept and aesthetic it was.

‘That garden is so beautiful.’

‘Of course it is, my best friend is a florist after all.’

‘Is that her house?’

‘Correct!’ she smiled as she walked into the garden, Chuuya following right behind as he marvelled at its beauty.

Yosano knocked on the door upon reaching it. The door opened to reveal an elegant red-haired woman in a pink kimono.
Both women greeted each other with a friendly smile. Then, Yosano pointed at Chuuya. ‘This is Chuuya, the new co-worker I mentioned.’

‘Nice to meet you… big sis?’ It was at that moment that Chuuya realised he had no idea what her name was since Yosano had never mentioned it, so he settled on calling her ‘big sis’.

‘The name is Kouyou, lad.’

‘Eh, you’re calling her big sis already when you’ve known her for less time than you’ve known me?’ Yosano said, sounding slightly bemused.

Chuuya averted his gaze and played with a lock of his hair nervously. When he spoke, his voice was quieter than normal and he sounded somewhat embarrassed, but mildly hopeful. ‘Would you prefer it if I called you big sis Akiko?’

Yosano had not realised how much she wanted a younger brother until that moment. ‘Big sis Akiko… I like the sound of that. Feel free to call me that from now on.’

‘Then, I’ll call you big sis Akiko and big sis Kouyou.’

‘…I’m not old enough to be called that, but I can see you aren’t going to give up and I don’t particularly mind, so call me whatever.’

‘I would feel rude if I just called you by your name.’ Indeed, that was one reason why he chose to call them that. The other was that in the Sheep, it was not rare for younger children to call the other ones ‘big sis’ or ‘big bro’, so it would have felt inappropriate not to do so. He was secretly glad to have regained a modicum of normality from his time with the Sheep now that he could call both Yosano and Kouyou that, and it was a sign that he was building a friendship with them, which was a bonus.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Kouyou replied calmly and signalled for them to come inside.

While on the hallway, Kouyou and Yosano chatted. ‘Is Kisuke around, by the way?’ Yosano enquired.

‘No, he’s out with some friends. On the bright side, the French wine I told you about finally arrived this morning, so that’s more for us.’

‘I can’t wait to try it!’

The exchange about wine piqued Chuuya’s interest. He had tried sake before, though he did not really like it. Nonetheless, he was curious if French wine was truly as good as its reputation led him to believe.

Later that night, Dazai was thankful that Odasaku had stopped him from getting drunk out of his mind the moment he started getting misspelt texts from Slug. After he got home, he had to look after a very drunk Chuuya, not that Chuuya remembered any of it the next day.

It had been three months since they joined the Armed Detective Agency. Somehow, Dazai and Chuuya managed to make living together work. Chuuya took care of most of the cooking and
cleaning, though Dazai did try to help when he could. Try was the key word, for it turned out that outside of being downright lazy and eager to shove his workload on other people, Dazai Osamu had no talent for housework, not to mention that whenever he did cook, his cooking choices and combinations raised more questions than having hotpot in the summer. Nor did he have any talent for martial arts while Chuuya was a natural, as they figured out during their martial arts training with Odasaku.

Before they knew it, they ended up spending most evenings playing video games or watching films and series in the living room, usually accompanied by Chuuya’s heavenly cooking or pizza. Granted, they argued when it came to what they played or watched since their tastes were entirely parallel, but they resolved that by alternating who chooses what every time. That did not stop them from talking trash about whatever the other selected, though. Frequenting the arcade which they went to when they bumped into the Sheep so as to beat each other up in video games while on investigations helped them cope with each other too. If they had discovered something while living together, it was that they were completely different, but that they did have one huge thing in common: both of them could appreciate literature. Indeed, Dazai preferred prose while Chuuya preferred poetry, but they could still respect each other’s interest in reading.

On other days, having their own space to retreat to when they were sick of each other proved invaluable. When Dazai did not purposefully invade Chuuya’s personal space to drive him up the wall and when he did not take over his room out of boredom, that is. Both could swear having their own rooms was the main reason why they had not destroyed the house and why they had not killed each other yet. Even so, in spite of their arguments and differences, they lived an interesting life full of bliss together as detectives.

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and reality struck them with a rude reminder of that when they expected it least.

Chapter End Notes

Soukoku needed a little break from life after the previous chapters, so this chapter was neither action-packed nor plot-heavy. I REGRET NOTHING. Chuuya deserves to have his caring ane-san, the Buraiha deserve to be a happy friend group and Kouyou deserves her good ending. Besides, I think Yosano and Kouyou would totally get along and that Yosano would have been Kouyou’s equivalent to Chuuya had Kouyou joined the ADA instead. We will get back to the plot in the next chapter, though!

Fun fact:
I chose ‘Kisuke’ for Kouyou’s lover’s name since we do not know his real name and ‘Kisuke’ is spelt with the characters for ‘hope’ and ‘help, save’ here, which I thought was fitting.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Hi again! There is a bit of Spanish and French in this chapter, for which the translations will be provided in the end notes just like in chapter 4.

Heads up, this chapter is 10000+ words long. This is because it is an investigation chapter and I did not want to draw out this part of the case for more than one chapter because there are still many things to come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Just to recapitulate, your restaurant was burnt down and you believe one of your employees was responsible for it?’ Chuuya asked with interest in the respectful and dignified tone he adopted whenever he spoke to a client about a case. He was at a table in Café Uzumaki with a pen and a notepad full of notes in his hands. Dazai was sitting next to him with his usual laid-back smile, fully intending to let Chuuya do all the work.

‘Yes, that’s correct,’ the well-built bearded foreign middle-aged man in a hat who introduced himself as Michele Severino confirmed. He had come along with a pretty woman who seemed to be in her early twenties, though she had not spoken a word so far as she did not speak Japanese.

‘And said employee was dodgy at best.’

‘Indeed. He had several weird moments when he lost his temper and seemed off.’

‘Why didn’t you fire him?’

‘We’re very short-staffed, you see. It’s quite hard to find staff who speak both Japanese and European languages.’

Instead of raising an eyebrow in either suspicion or amazement at the bad move which the man in front of him had made like he would have done had he not been conversing with a client, Chuuya maintained his neutral expression. After all, his job was not to judge; it was to investigate and find out the truth.

‘So, you want us to investigate the building and your employee in order to find proof so that you can sue for damages.’

Michele nodded. ‘That’s correct.’

‘As much as I’d like to offer our services, sir, I’m not sure this is the type of work that we undertake here at the Armed Detective Agency.’

Dazai covered Chuuya’s mouth with his hand. ‘What my partner means is that we would be more than happy to help, we just need a bit more detail about your situation and employee to make sure this is within our expertise!’ he proclaimed in a jovial voice while Chuuya tried to pry his hand off to no avail.

‘Here’s a picture of Pierre,’ he said while passing them a picture of an average-looking brown-
haired brown-eyed European man. ‘His ability is to create lightning, and the fire was started by frying the distribution board. That’s why I suspect he did it.’

Having finally managed to get Dazai off him, Chuuya resumed the conversation. ‘Why would he want to set the restaurant on fire?’

‘Shortly after I hired him, money began to go missing. All of the evidence I would’ve had on that, like my accounting records, burnt alongside the restaurant.’

‘Have you told the police about this?’

‘Yes. Even so, they couldn’t find anything. I tried other detective agencies in Tokyo and elsewhere, but nobody was willing to take up the case since it involves a potentially dangerous ability user. You’re my last hope.’

Chuuya could not deny that a guy who could emanate such strong lightning that he could ignite a building did sound a tad too dangerous for normal police personnel and detectives to handle, so he accepted his reasoning. Maybe this was a case for the Armed Detective Agency after all.

He looked at Dazai for a second to check if they agreed regarding how to proceed. Their agreement remained unvoiced, for any words would have been superfluous. ‘Alright, we’re in. However, we do need more information. Do you have security footage from the moment before the fire began?’

‘No. There was a power outage in the area at the time, so the cameras stopped working.’

Both boys narrowed their eyes and gazed at each other. A power outage right before an electrical fire starts at the apparent hand of a lightning-using gifted? The circumstances sounded quite incriminating for lightning guy.

Surprisingly, Dazai actually asked a question instead of sitting back and doing nothing. ‘When was this?’

‘Three nights ago. He’s been off the grid ever since.’

Dazai watched him with askance while Chuuya continued the questioning since all of the evidence was circumstantial. ‘Was there anyone around at the time or did anyone see anything? And how did your employee act prior to the event?’

‘The neighbours didn’t see anyone. As far as I know, the last person who saw him was another one of my employees, his manager, who worked the last shift before the fire with him. He’s the only one with whom he would’ve had any contact, since there’s little to no contact between the cooks and customer service staff. I haven’t spoken about this to him yet, though, so I don’t know if there were any changes in his behaviour on that day.’

‘Could you please give us his details so we can question him regarding your alleged arsonist?’ Dazai requested.

‘Sure, I’ll send you an email with everything you need once I get back.’

‘That would be ideal, thanks,’ Chuuya replied with a nod. ‘Well, then, that’s all. We will contact you if we have any further questions and we will do our best to discover the evidence you need to back up your claim as soon as possible.’

‘Brilliant! Thank you both, it was lovely to meet you.’
‘Likewise,’ the teens responded in sync.

‘We will take our leave now.’ Afterwards, he turned to the young woman. ‘Nuestra parte aquí ya está hecha. Vamos, Veronica,’ the man signalled to her, who got up and left together with him.

Michele’s last words baffled Chuuya. His name was Italian, so how come he spoke Spanish? It was possible that he had lived in a Spanish-speaking country for a while or that he simply learnt it at some point, but it was still not exactly expected. Most of all, what did he even mean that their part was done? Was he referring to their part in launching the investigation, perhaps?

‘Is something wrong?’ Dazai inquired with concern.

‘I wish he told us he knows Spanish. He could’ve briefed me in Spanish if he found that easier and I could’ve translated that for you.’

Dazai chuckled, brimming with self-confidence. ‘As if you would ever have to translate anything for me.’

‘Do you speak Spanish too?’

‘Indeed!’ he confirmed, sounding as if he had just one-upped Chuuya. ‘And English, German, Korean and Russian, as well.’

Pretending he was not amazed was futile, but Chuuya could still stop this from being a complete loss for him in their ongoing rivalry. ‘I also speak English and German.’

‘Just two more languages and you’ll finally reach my level! But by then, I’m going to be in the lead anyway, because I would have more than enough time to learn another language in the meantime. Still, I’m impressed you managed to fit in that many languages in that miniature brain of yours, shorty. Maybe one thing about you is normal-sized after all.’

‘I am normal-sized! I may be on the shorter side for now, but my height is within the normal range and I still have time to grow.’

Dazai’s copious laughter resounded in the cafe. ‘Somehow, I highly doubt you will.’

‘Just so you wait, I’m gonna’ be taller than you one day!’

‘Oh, really? Want to make that a bet, then?’

‘Game on, bastard, I’m gonna’ make you eat your words!’

‘Yeah, yeah, sure, you will,’ Dazai said dismissively. ‘Until then, we should probably get going already if we want to finish the investigation today.’

Once they announced the other detectives that they will probably not be in the office for the rest of the day or tomorrow, Dazai and Chuuya got ready and set off for Tokyo within the hour.

First, they had a look around the high-end European restaurant where the arson had taken place. The local police had already passed them their investigation report from when they arrived at the scene and they had received all the information they needed from Michele as well. Furthermore,
they had a warrant to enter both the premises of the building and Pierre’s flat. Their first stop was the restaurant purely because they expected to find nothing there, making it a quick stop.

‘The fire sure spread like crazy,’ Chuuya noted upon entering the charred remains of the building. ‘Regular electrical fires don’t always spread this much.’

‘Agreed,’ Dazai seconded. Foul play had to be involved, especially considering how much damage was done in the little time the fire lasted. As the restaurant catered to the upper-middle class in the exclusive residential area of Azabu, plenty of people lived nearby, which helped since they telephoned 119 fast, resulting in firefighters putting out the fire within an estimated fifteen minutes of its start. Miraculously, none of those people had sighted a certain ability user who was suspected in their case, or so they told the police.

Whenever they worked on a case as partners, they had an ongoing bet about who could find evidence and solve the case first. Such was the nature of their rivalry, which could bring out both the worst and the best in them in their continuous quest to outdo one another. As such, they kicked off the investigation by splitting up. Dazai walked over to the staff room and Chuuya went straight to the electrical room and storage room.

Dazai scrutinised the staff room carefully. No belongings were around, either due to never being there or catching fire. Most of it was melted and guessing what some of the burnt things in the room must have been before the fire was impossible. Even so, two metal lockers did survive in tolerable condition, so he picked the locks.

One locker had employee records, such as contracts and timesheets. Several of them were missing. Notably, none of the remaining files mentioned Pierre once, and there was not a single paper from the last few days prior to the fire, which was suspect at best.

The other locker was less exciting, containing spare forms and labels for when the bills were arranged into stacks to make handling them easier.

Next up, Dazai made rounds around the kitchen. The smell of oil and burnt plastic was so overwhelming that it made him grimace, especially given that it had already been two days since the fire. Remains of plastic in places where they should not have been were also visible. His work done, Dazai called for Chuuya to join him outside when he finished his side of the investigation.

Under five minutes later, Chuuya emerged from the building and they got on the train. The employee’s flat was in Nakano, so they did not get there until an hour later. Thanks to time constraints, they were unable to linger around long enough to inform each other of their thoughts regarding the investigation, nor were they able to discuss it on public transport in front of all the random civilians surrounding them. Therefore, they spent the ten-minute walk to the flat outlining and analysing the case.

‘Did you find anything, Dazai?’

‘Just that the kitchen smelled of oil and burnt plastic, there weren’t any physical records about Pierre and that they love putting the same label on their stacks of money. I presume the records burnt to a crisp or that he took them with him. Anything interesting on your end?’

‘The distribution board was black and burnt beyond recognition, but there was a faint smell of oil near it too. Yet, the storage room did not smell like oil at all, which makes me think he most likely moved the oil to the electrical room and kitchen in order to fuel the fire. Judging by how he needed oil, the gifted we’re dealing with probably isn’t that strong.’
Dazai brought his finger up to his lips, as if in deep thought. He concluded that the presence of oil could be a good omen, but it could also be a spanner in the works. ‘Either that or the culprit is someone else. Would a lightning user really need some kind of fuel?’

‘Yes, if their ability can’t produce huge amounts of lightning. We have no way of knowing how potent his ability is, though. Perhaps he used the oil so as to keep suspicion off himself? That’s what I’d do to mask my trail if I had his ability and wanted to start a fire, ‘cause if there’s oil, he can say it wasn’t him since he might not have needed it.’

‘Fair enough. Business was going well, and the owner hasn’t made any fishy insurance-related moves over the past six months he’s been the boss, so I doubt it’s insurance fraud. Not to mention he wouldn’t have asked anyone to investigate if that was the case, which implies the owner can’t be behind it.’

‘It can’t be one of the other employees as they wouldn’t have managed to create a district-wide power outage. An electricity-related ability would be perfect for that. All the evidence points to him.’

‘Indeed. Let’s see if we can uncover any indication of that in his flat, shall we?’

They arrived at the flat and wasted no time before going in. Inside, everything was a mess. It was far from filthy, but it had clearly not been cleaned prior to the resident falling off the face of the Earth. Several clothes and objects were scattered around haphazardly, portraying the impression that someone left in a hurry. What was odder was that there was an impersonal clinical air in the flat, as if whoever lived there was not around much. It did not feel like a home; rather, it resembled a characterless place which just happened to have things lying around.

Chuuya started to look through the living room and kitchen while Dazai checked the bedroom and the bathroom. What stood out most to Chuuya at first sight was that Pierre owned several pieces of expensive technology, such as the latest gaming consoles, a rather large LCD TV, a robot vacuum and a professional espresso machine, all of which seemed new. Consequently, he looked through the drawers to see if he could find anything unordinary there as well. Most of the kitchen drawers turned out to be freezer drawers, which were most likely outside the budget of a waiter too, even if said waiter was employed by what had been one of the most expensive restaurants in the city.

Some of the cupboards in the kitchen were too high up for Chuuya to see into, so he used gravity to float up in the air. He did not need Dazai’s help to reach the top shelf, thank you very much. Within the cupboards, there was nothing, but weirdly enough, there did seem to be something peeking out from atop one of them.

On top of a cupboard was a French cookbook. Chuuya opened it and noticed that a few page numbers were circled: 14, 27, 159 and 268. They had the recipes for foie gras, coquilles Saint-Jacques, roast turkey with chestnuts and bûche de Noël, which was not necessarily strange since they were all Christmas dishes and Christmas was coming up relatively soon.

In the meantime, Dazai was making his own discoveries. The bed was just as luxurious as the objects in the living room and kitchen, and there was also a hot tub in the bathroom. Outside of that, the drawers and wardrobe had been emptied for the most part, with the remaining clothes being a mix of nondescript clothing one can find anywhere and designer clothing. Nothing but innocuous objects like pens, a notebook and random decorations could be seen.

As for the bathroom, not even shampoo and soap were around, making Dazai think that it looked quite a bit like a typical showroom picture posted online to advertise the vacancy. One might think that indications of a person living there would be present, whether in the form of a strand of hair or
soap stains, but all such hints were absent.

To be fair, the bathroom was quite dark. Perhaps such signs of life would become discernible with the lights on. Sufficient light was coming from the bedroom, so Dazai could see that the light switch was on the faience wall to his left. Over-confident in his ability to hit a light switch in a place he had never visited before without even looking at it in the dark, he tried to turn on the light while scanning the bathroom more closely.

…And he missed the light switch, making the wall he hit shift slightly.

Now, Dazai was very much aware that he was not as strong as to make a wall slide with his touch alone. That was Chuuya’s realm, not his. He flipped the light switch on for real and inspected the wall. Indeed, the wall had moved a couple of centimetres, making it look out of place even though it would literally have been invisible had he not realised that it was not fixed.

Applying more pressure to the wall, he swiftly disconnected the fake tiles, which were connected to the real tiles with an opening mechanism akin to that of a door. Beyond the wall was a locked safe which required a ten digits long combination.

Needless to say, Dazai had no idea what the code could be. None of the metal digits had fingerprints or exhibited more indicators of wear and tear than the others, nor was there a clue in the bathroom itself.

He recalled that in the bedroom, there was a notebook on the desk, which had caught his eye from the second he stepped in. Maybe that notebook contained the combination which the safe necessitated, so he decided to test that hypothesis right away.

When Dazai opened the notebook, he realised it was actually a planner. There did not seem to be any writing under any date, though. Regardless, Dazai skipped to October, November and December, hoping that Pierre merely had a late start.

A piece of paper fell once Dazai got to the last three months. He picked up the handwritten note.

Partout où nécessité fait loi.

Dazai looked at the note with confusion. That writing made little sense and did not answer any questions. He would keep it in the back of his mind in the future, but currently, he was more curious whether there was a link between the note and the page it was on.

Turns out the page where the scrap of paper had been included the date from three nights ago. That day alone was circled.

Continuing his search for a way to open the safe, he examined the drawers. Sadly, all of them were empty. They were not totally useless, though; from the outside, the nightstand’s drawers seemed to have slightly more space than they did in reality, which gave Dazai an idea.

‘Chuuya!’ he shouted.

‘What the fuck do you want?’ Chuuya yelled back from the kitchen.

‘Come here!’

Wondering what transpired, Chuuya sauntered over immediately. ‘What did you call me here for?’

‘Flip the nightstand over.’
‘Do it yourself next time, you lazy piece of garbage,’ he said while using his ability to do as told.

‘It’s much more convenient to have my dog do it for me,’ Dazai declared with a mocking smile.

‘Do you really wanna’ get kicked into oblivion that badly, you –’

Chuuya stopped before he finished the sentence. He was eyeing something behind Dazai inquisitively.

Dazai caught on that Chuuya was staring at the safe, for the bathroom wall with the safe was right behind him from this angle.

‘Why the hell is a safe here?’

‘I’ll tell you once I manage to get that safe open.’

Then, Dazai grabbed a pen off the desk and crouched down to the nightstand so as to test his hypothesis. If his theory was correct, the mismatch between the space inside the drawer and the size it appeared to have from afar was because it had a false bottom.

Lo and behold, there was a tiny hole on the bottom of the drawer. Dazai inserted the pen and removed the false bottom with ease. Doing so revealed a thin folder with a few pages at the very end of it. He guessed that there must have been more folders there originally, but that when leaving in a rush, Pierre accidentally left one of the folders behind.

‘Dazai, you need to see this,’ Chuuya announced in an urgent manner.

‘Right back at you,’ Dazai replied while taking the folder to the bathroom.

Much to his surprise, the safe was unlocked, unveiling several stacks of money. No, the safe was not broken into a million pieces; somehow, Chuuya had succeeded in what he had been attempting to do to no avail.

‘How did you open it?’

‘There’s a French cookbook in the kitchen with some page numbers circled. I took a wild guess and inputted the page numbers.’

A smile appeared on Dazai’s face. In the beginning, he had believed Chuuya to be muscle and impulsiveness in a can, but the more they investigated together, the more it seemed like Chuuya did have a functioning brain. ‘Well done. Don’t get too cocky, though! Even a child could’ve figured that out.’

‘I don’t give a fuck, all I care about right now is that the marks on the labels are the same as the ones at the restaurant. They mark all of their stacks of bills the same way there, don’t they?’

‘They do.’

‘Which means this must be stolen money, just as Michele suspected.’

Going by that trail of thought, Chuuya snapped several photographs of the safe and bills. The sum in the safe was not that high, but they could explain that as Pierre not having had enough time or space to take all of the money at once, and theft and embezzlement were the same regardless of the amount. Considering the tenancy had not been terminated yet, maybe he intended to return for the rest of the money soon.
But if the physical evidence they needed was in the safe… what was in the folder Dazai had discovered?

With this question in mind, Dazai opened the folder. The contents of the folder were several pictures. Each picture except for one was of a different location in Yokohama. He recognised all of them as he and Chuuya had been to those places before. None of those locations were tourist attractions or anything remotely exciting. The single picture with no relation to Yokohama was of the woman they had met at the case briefing, Veronica, and an unknown man of the same age. Nonetheless, he brushed the pictures off for the time being as they did not appear to have any direct relevance to their case. They could work out what the pictures signified later.

Due to the time it took to get from one place to another, it was already evening when they exited the flat, which left them with no time to conduct the interview they had to do for the investigation. Exasperated by the fact that they had to spend roughly four hours on public transport on one day by the time they got home, Chuuya decided to get his driver’s licence as soon as he was of age, and both of them decided to postpone interviewing the last person on shift until the next day.

Tonight was another one of their stay-in nights. Chuuya was making tofu and vegetables yaki udon for dinner and floating island for dessert. Meanwhile, Dazai was keeping him company to create the illusion that he was doing something useful.

‘…Just what are you doing?’ Chuuya asked, watching Dazai in disbelief.

Dazai put on a bright smile and stopped painting his nails to reply. ‘Getting in touch with my feminine side! Wanna’ try it as well?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘Aww, too bad! This shade would suit you so well too…’

‘The answer is still no.’ Having no interest in painting his nails black, Chuuya proceeded to chop vegetables and continued talking in a conversational tone. ‘The arson site wasn’t as useless as I thought it would be. I wasn’t expecting to find much in a burnt building to begin with, and while that’s exactly what we got, it was still useful in a weird way.’

‘Yeah. We got a lot of work done today, so it’s time for a well-deserved rest!’

Chuuya glanced at him with a deadpan look. ‘You rest all the time.’

‘This is a type of work too.’

‘It’s anything but work.’

‘Not my fault a workaholic shrimp like you can’t appreciate a good rest.’

An eye roll and a deep exhale later, Chuuya was once again calm enough not to forgo cooking and stab Dazai with the knife instead. ‘At least I do work, unlike you.’

‘Objection, I do my share. Who was it who discovered the safe with the evidence, hmm’

‘And who was it who opened it?’
‘You just happened to stumble upon the code first.’

‘Yeah, whatever, at least we got it open without breaking it,’ he responded while taking the udon noodles off the stove.

‘That isn’t even the most suspicious factor.’

Chuuya stopped in his tracks on the way to bring sauce from the cupboard. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Just who keeps the code for their safe in a cookbook and forgets to take said cookbook when he runs away, especially when they still have money in the safe?’ Dazai wondered, sounding perplexed and doubtful.

‘Pierre, apparently. I assume he thought no one would find it since it was on top of a cupboard where it couldn’t be spotted without getting on a chair.’

The thought of Chuuya climbing on a wobbly chair and trying to reach a book was too hilarious to pass up, so Dazai hoped that is what occurred. ‘Is that what you did to get to it?’

‘Why would I do that? I can control gravity, in case you forgot.’

That reminded Dazai of one last thing he wanted to discuss. ‘Speaking of our findings today, do you have any guesses on what the note and pictures mean?’

Chuuya drained the water from the udon absent-mindedly while thinking out loud. ‘No idea for the note, it could just be an insignificant thing he wrote. People do that all the time. Given that Michele and Veronica weren’t wearing wedding rings and how close she was to the man in the picture, I’m guessing that must be her lover, albeit I can’t come up with a reason why Pierre would have that picture. As for the other pictures, maybe Pierre is planning to escape through the Port of Yokohama ‘cause Tokyo is too close to home, so the airports, boats and trains there are the first places anyone would look for him if he tries to flee the country.’

‘Could be,’ Dazai replied, lacking confidence on the matter and leaving the possibilities open. What his partner proposed made sense, yet he had a hunch that was not all there was to it.

Their chat paused for a bit as Chuuya needed to assemble the meal in the pan.

‘Dazai, I was wondering…’ he started after tossing the udon in the pan with the tofu, vegetables and sauce.

‘What is it, shorty?’

‘How come you speak so many languages?’

‘Funny that you ask, I was also wondering the same thing about you today. To answer your question, my parents hired private tutors to teach me those languages. My father’s wish was for me to follow into his footsteps, so he wanted to ensure I knew enough languages to get by later.’

‘Was he a translator or interpreter?’

‘Not at all. He was a military doctor with Mori during the war. After the war ended, he became a politician. Speaking several languages is invaluable in politics, hence why he had me learn some.’

‘That’s really nice of him.’

Dazai did not reply to that, opting to change the subject instead. ‘How about you?’
He turned around to answer the question. ‘Well, I speak English ‘cause it’s everywhere on the internet, so learning it was inevitable. As for German and Spanish, I had plenty of free time in the Sheep, so I learnt them to sing along to rock songs and Latin pop, respectively.’

‘Seriously?’

Chuuya averted his gaze, trying very hard to look at the pan instead. ‘…Yeah.’

‘I knew you love music, just not that you love it that much. It’s so cute!’ Dazai stated in a chirpy tone.

‘No, it isn’t!’ he yelled as a blush started to appear on his cheeks. He was glad that he was not facing Dazai, for he would never have heard the end of it if he saw him at that moment. Yet, he could not deny that hearing those words made him… happy. But only a bit. He hated being called cute, but he supposed it was tolerable if Dazai said it, for that was as close as he could get to Dazai saying anything positive about him. Not that he wanted Dazai to say anything good about him; the nice words of someone who hates you either serve to tease you or mean nothing, after all. In an attempt to get rid of any thoughts regarding the matter, he changed his focus to not burning the yaki udon.

Dazai was battling a similar dilemma. He did not call Chuuya’s love for music cute to mess with him; he genuinely meant it, which was the concerning part. More and more frequently, he found himself unconsciously noticing how Chuuya brightened up whenever he chatted about his hobbies or cooked and how it made his day to see Chuuya laugh and smile. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore and Dazai did not like that. Nevertheless, Dazai had given up on feeling anything long ago, so he overlooked it. As the weeks and months went by, his constant failure to find a reason to live even on the side of light was making him gradually lose what little hope Chuuya awakened in him. Thus, it became easier to reject the notion of rediscovering feelings he believed to be long gone.

Dazai was brought back to reality by Chuuya’s tone, which could only have been described as tentative, as if he were testing the waters. ‘Talking of your parents, how did you end up in Mori’s care? You don’t have to answer if you’re not comfortable with that.’

‘Eh, are you concerned about me?’ he teased, faking surprise.

‘Why would I ever be worried about the likes of you, jerk? I just don’t care enough to beat it out of you if you don’t want to talk!’

Dazai shrugged. ‘In that case, perhaps I won’t say a thing.’

‘Fine by me,’ Chuuya hissed while beating the eggs for the floating island with too much force.

After mulling it over for a few moments, Dazai conceded. ‘I’m feeling generous tonight, so I’ll tell you. Over a year ago, I unfortunately failed to commit suicide. Such a pity, truly.’ Chuuya stopped beating the eggs for a split second, not because his hand was tired, but because the sentence generated apprehension in him. ‘My father couldn’t risk his reputation by letting the media catch wind of the fact that his son had attempted to kill himself, so he wanted to wash his hands off me. For that aim, he admitted me into the mental ward of the hospital where Mori was the chief physician permanently and gave Mori custody. Eventually, my parents died. I have no other family, leaving me with no one except for Mori.’

Chuuya instantly regretted his premature positive words about Dazai’s father. Any man who would push his ambitions onto his son and abandon him the moment anything happens instead of
doing his best to be there for him was hardly worthy of the title of ‘father’. He could appreciate that he at least attempted to get him some help, but it seemed like his help of choice had not been effective and he did not even care. Chuuya kept his thoughts to himself out of respect for the dead and stuck with the most standard response one could give in this situation. ‘My condolences.’

‘It’s okay. They weren’t great parents anyway. They didn’t abuse me per se, but they were hardly ever around, so I was raised by servants mostly.’ The aloof and disconnected way in which Dazai claimed it was alright did not sit well with Chuuya. Rather than feeling like he was truly over it and did not mind, Chuuya had an inkling that he was simply covering up his true sentiments on the matter. There was nothing to suggest that, not in his words, posture or anything, but Chuuya still got that feeling at the back of his head that told him something was off. His intuition had always been good, so he was almost certain that he was correct, although he chose to drop the issue out of consideration for Dazai, who did not seem willing to talk any further about it.

One thing did start to make sense to Chuuya, though. Dazai was horrible at housework, shopping and everything related to being a functional human who can take care of himself because he had never had to look after his own needs. That had been the servants’ and hospital workers’ job, not his. It was very possible that the day they began the Arahabaki investigation had been one of Dazai’s first days as a free person who had to look after himself. No wonder he did not know how to stock up the hideout he had prepared for them when they were on the run from the mafia.

‘It’s nice that you had the servants, at least.’ Chuuya presumed that Dazai might be fond of his previous servants, so he hoped that by changing the topic to them, the conversation might become a bit more light-hearted. When Dazai neither agreed nor disagreed, he carried on the conversation.

‘Do you ever miss the servants?’

Dazai went silent for several seconds. ‘…No, I don’t miss them overall.’ He kept his voice controlled and even, reminding Chuuya of those first few days they spent together when he sounded like a lifeless shell.

‘That’s good,’ Chuuya said in a manner which indicated that there was more to follow after that sentence, only to break it off halfway through. Intuiting that there was something else on his mind, Dazai kept quiet, wordlessly urging Chuuya to go on, which he did after a bit, his voice hesitant.

‘What about Mori and the Port Mafia? Do you ever regret quitting?’

His partner laughed so hard that he had to put a hand over his stomach, barely avoided knocking over the nail polish and almost fell off the chair. ‘As if. I’d rather be alone for life than cling to them.’ As honest as his answer was, a tiny part of him wondered how his life would have differed had he never left the mafia. Would he have discovered a reason to live by now?

‘There’s no need for that, for you aren’t alone anymore.’

Leave it to Chuuya to stun Dazai with his ceaselessly caring nature, just as he had done continually since they met. Even though he could not bring himself to say that he was there for him directly, he implied it in a way that allowed him to deny it if confronted about it. Dazai found that so adorable that he broke out into a grin and could not resist teasing him. ‘Ooh, I wonder what you could possibly mean by that!’

‘Don’t misunderstand, it’s just that the Agency is around and so forth!’ As predicted, Chuuya rejected his own part in the matter, speaking at a faster pace than normal.

‘True.’ Dazai wished to taunt him further, but there was a more pressing concern he had to address. ‘Do you miss the Sheep?’
Chuuya paused cooking for a little in order to gather his thoughts and control his emotions. ‘A lot. I still care about them, but the past is the past, and I’m happier than I’ve ever been at the Agency.’ Upon hearing how fond and content Chuuya sounded, Dazai’s sincere smile grew. Just for a little longer, he decided to keep going, even if he could not find a reason to live. How long that would last was uncertain, though…

Not much small talk was made subsequently since Chuuya had to concentrate on cooking the floating island and the food was ready within minutes. The meal was delicious as always, and after it, Chuuya did the dishes.

‘Chuuya, I’m bored!’ Dazai whined from the sofa in the living room, which he was splattered over, once Chuuya finished the wash-up. ‘Entertain me.’

Over the past three days, while Odasaku was on a case in Tokyo, Dazai had bothered Chuuya with complaints of boredom more times than ever. Odasaku did mention that he will most likely be unable to contact the Agency and anyone there during the investigation, but Chuuya had not foreseen that Odasaku’s absence would mean that he would have to deal with Dazai more often. Quite frankly, it was starting to get on his nerves. ‘What am I, your plaything? Go entertain yourself.’

‘Come play Mononoke Land with me! There’s a co-op raid and I don’t want to do it with a random person who might suck at the game.’

Truth to be told, Chuuya was as much of an avid Mononoke Land player as Dazai, and they did make a formidable team, so they always breezed through the raids together. As such, Chuuya was not averse to the idea of playing for a bit after dinner. ‘Fine.’

Chuuya went to retrieve his handheld game device while Dazai sat up to make some space for Chuuya, who took a seat next to him on the sofa. They were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in order to monitor each other’s cooldowns so they could clear the raid in as little time as possible.

Two hours later, they decided they had had enough gaming for the night and decided to watch the latest episode of an anime they followed together.

‘Hey, Chuuya,’ Dazai said while waiting for the ad break to end.

‘Yeah?’

Dazai leaned on Chuuya’s shoulder to whisper in his ear. ‘Tomorrow, when we interview the manager, we’ll do it in Japanese.’

‘But why?’ Chuuya thought Dazai’s request was bizarre. They were going to interview a Frenchman and they both spoke French, so it would have made more sense to question him in a language he was sure to understand perfectly and in which he might have found it easier to express himself.

‘As a precaution. If he knows more than he’s willing to reveal and we pretend not to know French, he might let information slip in French within our earshot without realising we can understand everything.’

In Chuuya’s opinion, that was a bit excessive, but he did have faith in his partner, so he did not dispute the suggestion. ‘Okay.’
The person they were meant to interview was busy for the day, so it was not until 4 PM that they were able to meet up with him. Therefore, the boys spent the day doing case-related paperwork and going over the case in more detail. Dazai really wanted to avoid doing more work, so he insisted on inviting the last man on shift with Pierre to a café in Minato to carry out the interview, even though they would have a one and a half hours long train ride both on the way to the café and back in consequence. That way, they could leave work very early and waste a full three hours playing games and chatting instead of doing any proper work.

By the time they got off the train, the yellow and orange glow of twilight illuminated the streets, making it likely that they would need to take extra care when going home because it would probably be dark by then. On the bright side, the café was not far from the train station, so they arrived at their destination within minutes. Upon reaching the café, they headed straight to the private booth they had reserved for this occasion. Their interviewee was already there.

‘Good evening, sir,’ Chuuya said in a professional manner. ‘Thank you for coming on such short notice. We’re detectives from the Armed Detective Agency and we’d like to ask you some questions.’

‘Of course!’ the young fair-haired man responded in an overeager tone. ‘With whom do I have the pleasure?’

‘I’m Nakahara Chuuya, and this is my partner, Dazai Osamu.’ He pointed at Dazai, who just put on a vacant smile and made no motion to greet the person they were about to interview. He was too distracted by his attempt to convince himself that he did not like how his name rolled off Chuuya’s tongue.

‘Pleased to make your acquaintance. You can call me Donatien, darling,’ Donatien said as he looked Chuuya in the eye with half-lidded eyes and took Chuuya’s hand, bringing it up to chest level and kissing it.

Chuuya stood there with uneasiness written all over his face. Due to spending his entire life except for the past three months around children his age, he was not sure how to react in this situation. On one hand, he was extremely uncomfortable and wanted to punch the living daylights out of this guy. On the other hand, he was worried that if he retaliated, he would compromise the investigation by making the only person who could give them a hint regarding the true occurrences of the night the restaurant burnt down not cooperate. Donatien had the right to refuse to answer their questions for no reason whatsoever, and one reason could be the detectives behaving rudely to him, which could jeopardise the case. Had Chuuya been in the Sheep or in the Port Mafia, he could simply have fought back with violence like he always used to, but he had left that life behind, so he had to keep his temper in check for the sake of the Agency. He had no issue with that as he would do anything for the Agency. It was not as if Donatien had done anything that horrible, after all. Besides, he was French and worked amongst foreigners like himself, so maybe he merely had no grasp of Japanese culture, in particular of the fact that touching people without their permission was not a good idea. Chuuya would have felt impolite if he pointed that out, though. Perhaps he could give him the benefit of the doubt this time.

Thankfully, there was no need for Chuuya to get himself into an even more awkward situation, for Dazai stepped in and broke off the contact. ‘Uh-uh, that’s a bit too close for comfort, I’m afraid! It’s rude to touch people without their permission, you see?’ He spoke with fake cheerfulness hiding the poison in his words, albeit the lack of light in his eyes betrayed his less than friendly intentions.
For once, Chuuya was glad that his partner was shameless and did not seem to care whether they solved the case or not.

‘Now, let’s get to work!’ Dazai proposed, a mirthful impish smile plastered on his face. ‘We’re very busy and we wouldn’t want to take up much more of your time.’

He practically dragged Chuuya along and sat down parallel to Donatien.

This time, Dazai took charge of the interrogation, which was the opposite to how they usually operated. ‘Your employer told us you and your co-worker, Pierre, were last on shift before the fire.’ Funnily enough, he pronounced ‘Pierre’ the way a Japanese person who does not speak French would. Chuuya took that as his cue to purposefully mispronounce the name as well, no matter how much it hurt him to do so.

‘Yes, we were.’

‘Was his behaviour out of the ordinary throughout the workday?’

Donatien brought a finger up to the corner of his mouth and looked up as he tried to remember the events of that day. ‘Now that you mention it, Pierre seemed agitated and on edge all day. He didn’t talk much, had his head up in the clouds most of the time and spent more time texting in secret than ever. Several times, he got orders wrong, which wasn’t like him at all. He moved more slowly than normal too.’

‘Did he do anything unusual?’

‘He did go to the kitchen way too often even when he knew his orders hadn’t come through yet, but I thought he was merely being impatient.’

Not wishing to pull a Dazai and let his partner carry out the entire interrogation, Chuuya intervened with a follow-up question. ‘Did he say anything odd as well?’

‘Not really. The first thing that comes to mind is that when he came in, he said “Thanks for looking out for me as my manager”, which I thought was really sweet.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Hmm… During lunch, he asked if we had received our delivery in the morning as scheduled. I told him we had in fact received the delivery on time, and when I asked why he wanted to know that, he said he was just wondering since he didn’t see any cardboard boxes in the disposal area. It’s just something minor, but it stood out because he had never cared about anything of that sort before.’

Dazai had a solid guess regarding the contents of the delivery, but he had to check if he was right. ‘What was in the delivery?’

‘Essential ingredients like flour and oil.’

To summarise, they had received an oil delivery on that very day, which an employee suspected of arson had made sure of on the day of the fire, yet the storage room did not have the strongest oil odour; instead, the kitchen did, and said employee had been making rounds around the kitchen all day. That might be enough to prove criminal intent, but it felt like a piece was missing.

Seeking the lost piece, Dazai fished something out of his pocket and presented it to Donatien. ‘Do you have any idea who’s in this photo, by any chance?’
‘Oh, that’s a very interesting picture you have there,’ he answered with a mischievous smile. ‘That’s the boss’ gorgeous wife, Veronica, and Mihai.’

‘Who’s that guy?’ Chuuya asked.

‘Well, he’s a good friend of Veronica’s, or so they claim.’

A smirk appeared on Dazai’s lips. ‘I understand.’

Chuuya’s eyes darted from one person to the other, failing to catch on to what they were on about. ‘Meaning…?’

‘Ah, how should I put this… On the record, they’re friends, but it’s a bit hard to ignore how close they are, the tension between them when they’re in the same room and the furtive touches and glances whenever they think people aren’t watching.’ Donatien leaned forward a bit and cupped one hand next to his mouth as his voice fell into a whisper. ‘Or that one time Pierre and I saw them kissing.’

‘In other words, Veronica is cheating on her husband with Mihai,’ Chuuya declared to ensure he got things right. ‘Could you please tell us more about him?’

‘I don’t know him well; Pierre was much closer to him than I ever was. What I can tell you is that he works on a cruise ship currently and spends a lot of time with Veronica since they’re from the same country. Up until recently, we worked together at the restaurant, although he works in Yokohama now. Rumour has it that Michele fired him because he became wary of his relationship with his wife.’

At the mention of Yokohama, both teenagers remembered the pictures they found yesterday. A clearer overview of the case was forming, but it was dependent on one thing which Chuuya had to double-check. ‘Does Michele definitely know about her unfaithfulness?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Could you give us Mihai’s contact information?’ Dazai demanded in a lively voice.

‘Sure.’ Donatien took out a small notebook and a pen from his bag. ‘Here it is,’ he said while handing Dazai the note. ‘If it helps, he lives nearby, so I wrote down his address too.’

After writing something else on a second page, he tore the page and folded it. Then, he grabbed Chuuya’s hand with one hand and placed the note in it with the other. ‘If you need anything else or want to go out for a coffee, feel free to contact me.’

‘…Thanks,’ Chuuya replied in an awkward manner while Dazai glared daggers at Donatien. ‘I’ll let you know if we have any more questions.’

‘Anytime,’ Donatien winked and paid for his coffee. Then, he left.

‘What did he write there?’ Dazai asked immediately once Donatien was out of sight.

Chuuya looked at the note with a stupefied expression, then passed the note to Dazai. The note had Donatien’s name written in beautiful cursive with a phone number underneath.

‘Please tell me you aren’t actually going to meet up with him again.’

‘Of course I won’t! That would be unprofessional as fuck. Let’s hurry up and finish this, we need
to talk when we get home,’ Chuuya stated in a grave tone. The way he looked at Dazai and how he
delivered the last line told Dazai that this was something very important, though what exactly he
was referring to was up in the air.

No one picked up the phone when Dazai and Chuuya tried to get in contact with Mihai. However,
Chuuya was not in the mood to make the three-hour journey again, leading to them showing up on
Mihai’s doorstep unannounced, which is why they were currently in front of a decent-sized house.

Three knocks later, a well-groomed, but somewhat frail Caucasian man with brown hair opened the
door. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘Hi, we’re currently investigating the fire at your workplace,’ Dazai said affably while flashing his
Armed Detective Agency badge and holding out a hand to shake Mihai’s hand, which he did. ‘We
need to ask you a few questions.’

He watched them with a suspicious defensive gaze. ‘Am I under arrest?’

‘No, but you will be if you don’t cooperate,’ Chuuya answered in a tone which left no room for
protest.

Having no other choice, the reluctant host let them into the living room.

‘I will bring tea,’ Mihai announced as he retreated into the kitchen.

A minute later, he brought them a cup of green tea each.

The first one to reach for the teacup was Dazai, who did so at the speed of the light. ‘Eek, it’s so
hot! We’re going to wait for it to cool down a bit before drinking,’ he asserted, keeping his voice
light and carefree.

Another thing Chuuya had learnt during his time with Dazai was that he never spoke for them both
without reason. He was not the type to use ‘we’ in general, and whenever he did so without prior
agreement, it was always a signal or for their protection. As such, Chuuya understood that Dazai’s
words had been an order for him not to drink and chose to follow it, in spite of not comprehending
his motive.

For a split second, mild surprise appeared on Mihai’s face, but that disappeared so fast that most
people would not have spotted it. ‘That’s fine! Don’t let it cool down too much, though; tea is
better when hot. So, how may I help?’

Due to the cue not to drink, Chuuya took a back seat for the interrogation for the time being so as
not to risk getting in Dazai’s way. Thus, it was Dazai who began the questioning, Chuuya opting to
be on guard and monitor Mihai instead. ‘Do you know a waiter named Pierre?’

‘Yes, he’s a dear friend of mine from back when we worked together.’

‘When was the last time you spoke to Pierre and how did he behave then?’

‘Uh, that would’ve been… four or five days ago,’ Mihai responded, not looking them in the eye.
‘We had dinner at an izakaya. It was just a regular hangout like any other, nothing much.’
Neither Dazai nor Chuuya believed him, for he had basically weaselled his way out of the question. Dazai had an idea why that could be, and it was linked to a certain woman they had met yesterday, but first, he had to make sure his conclusion about the true events of the night of the fire was correct. ‘Where were you three nights ago?’

‘I was embarking on the ship I work on for a multiday cruise. I just returned today.’

Bingo. Just as Dazai expected. All he needed now was proof of the motive. ‘Talking about work, we heard some fascinating rumours regarding your termination at your former job. Allow me to cut to the chase: what’s your real relationship to Veronica?’

‘She’s the love of my life.’ For the first time that night, he seemed to be speaking openly from his heart.

‘How romantic!’ Dazai laughed while resting his face on his left hand and stirring his tea with the little finger on his right hand, presumably to test the temperature.

From the corner of his eye, Chuuya watched him attentively. He could have sworn that Dazai had painted his nails black, but the nail polish on his pinkie… was royal blue.

How was that possible? There was no nail polish besides the black nail polish in the house. Had he mistaken the colour of the nail polish? No, that could not be the case, for his other nails were indeed painted black.

Out of a sudden, Dazai dropped the casual smile, his eyes darkening and his voice transforming into the chilling tone he used when he caught someone out or wanted to back people into a corner. ‘That isn’t all there is to it, though, is it? Were you telling the full truth, you would have had no incentive to spike our drinks.’

Mihai paled and stared at Dazai in shock. Chuuya was almost as surprised as him and went on the defensive, watching Mihai even more warily than before and preparing to strike if need be.

‘I-I did no such thing,’ Mihai stuttered.

‘Is that so?’ Dazai said with a sarcastic smirk. ‘Let me break it down for you. Your good friend, Pierre, burnt down the restaurant he worked at, leaving behind no evidence since he used his ability to create a power outage to disable the cameras and start the fire with the help of the massive oil delivery they had just got that morning. We did find evidence of theft and embezzlement at his flat, though, and every record mentioning him either burnt in the fire or suspiciously disappeared from the restaurant, so we can assume that hiding his criminal offences was his motive.

‘In order to engage in such a risky course of action, Pierre needed assurance that he wouldn’t be caught. That’s where you come in. When you last met up with him, which I highly doubt was that long ago, you two discussed his plan to commit arson. It’s safe to assume you dislike your former boss because he’s your lover’s husband. As such, if your good friend requested your help in committing a crime against the reason why you can’t be with your loved one, you’re likely to oblige. Even if you weren’t willing, he could still blackmail you due to being aware of your real relationship with Veronica. You work on a cruise ship now, don’t you? If anyone could sneak a man on board, it would be you. Then, on the day of the fire, he texted you numerous times to ensure everything’s going as planned. After he set fire to the restaurant, he went to Yokohama, where he embarked on the ship you were working on with your assistance. That’s the natural conclusion which is supposed to be drawn from our evidence, right? Which is exactly why you put drugs in our tea. Your whole plan hinged on your implication remaining unknown. The moment
you’re discovered, everything falls apart, and you can’t have that if you want to continue seeing the love of your life.’

Chuuya did not comment. He officially wished he had disclosed his thoughts on the matter before they met Mihai. Alas, he could not tell Dazai what he had inferred in front of Mihai, so the only feasible variant he could choose was to play along and stay quiet until they got home.

Faced with Dazai’s accusations, Mihai’s entire demeanour changed. He was not nervous like someone who had been caught red-handed; rather, it felt like he dropped all masks, as if he could finally move on to the point of the conversation. ‘Unfortunately, now that you’ve come to that conclusion, I can’t let you go.’

A bright yellow glow surrounded Mihai’s silhouette. At that moment, Dazai and Chuuya realised they were dealing with an ability user.

‘Dazai, stand back!’ Chuuya instructed, although there was no need for him to do so, for Mihai instantaneously attacked Chuuya, ignoring Dazai.

Chuuya blocked Mihai’s attack with his arm and activated his ability to keep himself from flying into the wall. Underneath them, a crater was created as the two opposing forces clashed, making the earth crumble. Not possessing an ability that could prevent him from being blown away, the impact pushed Dazai away from what had become a combat zone.

Chuuya shot a quick glance out the window while walking over to his opponent. ‘I don’t have much time, so would you please stop struggling?’

‘Hey, bastard,’ Chuuya began, his voice croaky and determined. ‘I don’t care what your deal is, but you’re not getting away with this. You will tell us the truth, whether you want to or not, even if I have to punch it out of you. You understand?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t let that happen.’

Both of them flew at each other and started trading blows. Initially, Chuuya believed that he had an advantage since he could propel himself up into the air at will, but it turned out that Mihai could do that too, so their fight descended into an aerial battle that wrecked the house.

With each blow, the realisation that his attacks had no effect on Mihai while Mihai’s attacks could pierce through his defence dawned on Chuuya more and more. The more they fought, the more damage Chuuya took, despite his best efforts. For the second time in his life, Chuuya was not sure he could defeat an enemy by himself. The only other time he had had a similar sensation was when he fought Rimbaud.

His fight with Rimbaud and this fight had another significant factor in common: he had Dazai. As Mihai’s ability seemed to be able to overpower For The Tainted Sorrow, Chuuya switched to plan B.

After bringing their fight down to ground level, Chuuya kept the fight isolated in a very small area
of the room. Meanwhile, Dazai, who knew what Chuuya was thinking, ran to them. Then, shortly before Dazai reached them, Chuuya restrained Mihai by putting him in a chokehold. Neither combatant could move, which was precisely Chuuya’s intention.

However, Mihai rapidly freed himself and got as far away from Dazai as possible. Instead of closing the distance between him and the pair, he picked up the table and tossed it at them. When both Dazai and Chuuya dodged to the right, he repeated the action with a chair. This time, Dazai evaded to the left while Chuuya went to the right, and Mihai launched himself at Chuuya.

While Chuuya kept Mihai in place by grabbing his arms and refusing to let go, Dazai attempted to nullify Mihai’s ability once again. Alas, Dazai never got to Mihai for the second time in a row, since Mihai stepped back when he came closer.

Over the course of the confrontation, almost every wall had been destroyed, and the roof was not in much better condition either, letting the dimming light of late evening which descends into night seep into the room. They had more space to fight in now, but people were beginning to notice the ruined house.

For a moment, they stood there in a standstill. The detectives’ plan was to stick together so they could take him down, but somehow, it appeared that Mihai did not want to fight against them both at the same time.

‘You win this battle, but you won’t win the war.’ Upon voicing these words, Mihai took out a smoke grenade from his pocket, threw it and flew away into the sky.

He left behind two exhausted and confused boys with wildly different views on what had just transpired and what was going on in their case. Worst of all, the fact that Mihai could have drugged them both and defeated Chuuya without Dazai’s interference filled them with an eerie sense of dread.

Chapter End Notes

I promise there are plot-related reasons why they speak so many languages, it is only a partial case of author appeal.

I do not speak Spanish, but I have a friend who is fluent, so shout-out to her for being nice enough to lend me her amazing Spanish skills and to Nana (bastardogs) for correcting it in the comments! <3

Translations:
‘Our part here is done. Let’s go, Veronica.’
‘In every place where necessity makes law.’

Fun facts:
119 is the emergency number in Japan.
Azabu is one of the most expensive neighbourhoods to live in, which is the case for like every neighbourhood in Minato, the Tokyo ward where Azabu is.
Unlike Minato, Nakano is not particularly expensive. Commuting for an hour to get to work is not exactly rare in Japan, so Nakano would be a potential place to live for someone who works in Minato.
In canon, Soukoku meet during the summer sometime after Dazai’s 15th birthday, but
it is unclear if it is late June, July or August, which means that this chapter could be set anywhere between late October and December, hence why I had Dazai skip to the last three months in the planner instead of going to a specific date. Personally, my bet is on them meeting in July (making this chapter take place in November), but either way, it works.

Coquilles Saint-Jacques are scallops served in a creamy sauce with mushrooms while bûche de Noël is the traditional French Christmas yule log.

Yaki udon is fried udon in a thick sauce.

Michele is pronounced ‘Mee-keh-leh’ while Mihai is pronounced with ‘mi’ like in ‘mint’ and ‘hai’ like ‘Hi!’.

An izakaya is a cheap casual bar where they serve food and drinks, kind of like a pub.
Neither Dazai nor Chuuya spoke on the way home. Due to the attack, both had their guard up and kept an eye out for danger. Not that they would have talked much had they not got attacked; they were too perturbed and caught up in their own thoughts.

Once they were in the privacy of their own house, they took a seat next to each other on the sofa in the living room.

The moment they sat down, Chuuya broke the silence. ‘Okay, what the fuck was up with that? How did you even know he spiked our drinks?’

Dazai showed him his right hand. ‘This isn’t normal nail polish. It’s drug-detecting nail polish that changes colours when substances like Rohypnol, GHB and ketamine touch it. As you can see, it went from black to blue after I stirred the tea, which is how I knew that our drinks had some kind of drug in them.’

Chuuya had thought it was weird for Dazai to suddenly develop an interest in ‘getting in touch with his feminine side’, but how he chose to wear the nail polish at exactly the right time was unclear. ‘Why did you even wear that?’

Dazai averted his gaze and started partaking in his galling theatrics. ‘Why, I had a divine revelation that I should wear that nail polish, of course! The universe totally did us a solid there. Yay for being saved by Lady Luck!’

Upon hearing him, Chuuya looked at him with an expression which screamed ‘Are you kidding me?’. Unluckily for Dazai, they had spent too much time around each other over the past three months, and Dazai’s bluffing had lost any semblance of effect it might ever have had on him. ‘I can tell you’re bullshitting, you know.’

Dazai changed the subject. ‘Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about, shorty?’

Had Chuuya not been keen to tell him what was on his mind, he would have pressed for more details, but for now, they had a more important discussion lined up first. ‘I’ve solved the case.’

‘Eh? My, wouldn’t that be surprising!’ Dazai said with an amused chuckle. No matter how he looked at it, Chuuya did not possess enough information to work out what was actually going on. ‘Go ahead, then.’

‘Let me start at the beginning. You saw how the locker with employee records was closed, right? Yet, Pierre somehow managed to open it and take out any file mentioning him, even though it was locked and he couldn’t have known where the key was as a regular waiter. And that wasn’t even the most suspicious thing. Remember how empty and impersonal the flat seemed? There’s no fucking way a flat would look like that if someone actually lived in it, and it played way too much like an escape room or some shit. You were absolutely right, only an idiot would leave behind a cookbook with the code to a safe which contains stolen money, and even then, had he been at it for a while, I find it hard to believe he would pick pages with Christmas dishes as the combination months before Christmas itself or that he would even have physical proof of the code in the first place. Not to mention how he had expensive technology which he could only have bought with
stolen money scattered around, circled the date of the fire in the planner and left the planner there in plain sight too. That’s basically like shouting out loud about his crimes.

‘My guess is that the flat was staged. Everything there was planted to make us think what they wanted us to think. We were meant to discover the cookbook and the safe, we were meant to discover “proof” of Pierre’s crimes and jump to the conclusion that said proof is all we need for the case. Had we left it at that instead of talking to Donatien and Mihai, Michele would’ve had enough to prove Pierre had engaged in theft and embezzlement, and the case would’ve been over.

‘But that isn’t the point. Donatien made a mistake. If you look closely, the handwriting on the notes he gave us and the note you found at what’s supposedly Pierre’s flat is identical.’ Now that Dazai thought about it, they were indeed suspiciously similar, and he could not come up with a reason why Donatien wrote everything on the notes he gave them in the Latin alphabet instead of katakana either. ‘Considering the lack of records, mysteriously absent camera recordings, characterless flat and conveniently placed evidence, paired with your observation that a lightning-using gifted wouldn’t need oil to fuel a fire, it got me thinking… What if Pierre doesn’t exist?’

All the pieces fell into place.

Chuuya had just served him the missing piece of the puzzle on a silver platter. All along, the answer was staring him right in the face, and it took a certain hot-headed redhead to point it out to him. Dazai beamed, satisfied that he finally knew the truth behind the case and impressed beyond imagination by his partner.

While Dazai stared at him in astonishment, Chuuya continued explaining his reasoning. ‘That way, everything makes sense. There was no Pierre to begin with, it was Michele, Donatien and Mihai. Michele or Donatien, who must have the keys to open the lockers, took out some random records and every file relating to the few days before the fire to make it look as if Pierre wanted to erase any traces of his existence. Sometime before we went to the flat, they set it all up for us to “uncover” the evidence, then gave us the case.

‘As for Mihai, I believe he was honest when he called Veronica the love of his life. I couldn’t see any chemistry whatsoever between Michele and Veronica, nor did they have wedding rings, so it’s highly unlikely that they’re married as Donatien claimed. That leads me to believe the real couple is Veronica and Mihai. Because of that, there’s no incentive for discord between Michele and Mihai. Donatien’s role could’ve been to mislead us into thinking Pierre exists and would’ve had a way to leave through Mihai. He could’ve only done that with Mihai’s consent, though, considering that his lie would’ve come to light immediately hadn’t Mihai agreed to play along. With Pierre out of the picture, Donatien’s lie and Mihai’s cooperation, the only possibility which remains is that Michele, Donatien and Mihai are all in cahoots with each other. Thus, at least one of them was the real culprit behind the fire, for which they used oil precisely ‘cause they couldn’t have caused it without something to carry the flames. However, none of them would agree to cover up for the others without having a good reason, so I think what’s happening is that they’re all guilty of theft and embezzlement and trying to pass it on to a fictional person. Perhaps Mihai resigned from his former job to keep suspicion off him. It makes sense that Mihai would try to drug us when we figured out he’s involved too.’

Dazai’s expression brightened even more as he patted Chuuya on the head. ‘It’s such a pity you don’t use your brain more often.’

‘Don’t do that, you gormless cockwomble!’ he shouted, slapping his hand away. In all honesty, he did like it when people patted his hair, but he was not going to give Dazai that information, nor was it the right moment for that.
‘I can’t help it, you’re the perfect size for that with your height! Maybe you should try growing so no one can pat your head anymore.’ Dazai shrugged, as if it was not his own fault that his self-control failed for a second.

Wishing to get back on track and prevent himself from punching Dazai into next week, Chuuya turned away and crossed his arms. ‘Anyway, that’s what I think. I’m not sure what’s the thing with Michele and Veronica and how to prove Pierre is made-up without any camera recordings, though.’

‘I have an idea how to do that,’ Dazai said with confidence.

‘How?’

‘I happen to be good friends with an elite hacker with special government access to almost everything.’

To confirm Chuuya’s theory about Pierre, Dazai proposed that they call it a night and wait until tomorrow. There were several things he wanted to check first and foremost prior to that. Were his inference correct, that would change the entire case.

Which is why Dazai sneaked out of the house and went to the Armed Detective Agency’s office in the middle of the night without telling anyone. Had he done what he wanted to do in plain daylight with Chuuya and the others around, it would have caused more harm than good if he was right, hence why he had to break in at night. In spite of the fact that he was not particularly good with computers, he did know how to make surveillance cameras play a loop from when he had employed that technique to cover his tracks on the night he quit the mafia with Chuuya, so he managed to slip into the office unseen.

What Dazai wanted to check were the unlikely parallels between their case and Odasaku’s. Both cases happened in the Minato area and Odasaku ceased contact with the Agency on the day of the fire. Despite not having many details regarding his case since Odasaku seemed very intent on not telling him and Chuuya anything about it, he reasoned that eliminating the chance that Odasaku’s disappearance and the fire were linked was key. It was possible that it was a mere coincidence, but if it was not, then his guess was right and their case would turn out to be more trouble than they could have imagined when they accepted it.

Once inside the office, he approached Odasaku’s desk. In an uncharacteristic manner, Odasaku kept the files for his current case locked up in his desk drawer at all times, as if he did not want anyone to read them. Locks were no match for Dazai, though, so he picked the lock and extracted the folder with ease.

…The folder was full of familiar files.

In line with Dazai’s expectations, Odasaku’s case began with papers pertaining to three ability users he had seen before, the main focus being a certain gifted whom he had had the displeasure of meeting that day. Three months prior, Odasaku failed to apprehend him, even with Ranpo’s help. When Dazai asked what happened during their first hangout at Lupin, Odasaku dodged the question and said that he did not make it on time. He made up some story about how he ended up getting there late because he had issues with his car, which Dazai knew was false.

From the get-go, Dazai had been aware that Odasaku lied to him on that day. Ranpo said he could
reach him if he left within five minutes, so that was exactly what was meant to occur. But somehow, Odasaku did not manage to make Ranpo’s prediction come true. Ranpo was never wrong; the only circumstance in which his prognostication might not have become a reality was if he lacked crucial, utterly game-changing information. As Odasaku had not had the time to share more details about the case at the time, it was not irrational to consider the ridiculously tiny odds that there was much more to Odasaku’s case than anyone knew at the time.

Seeking the truth about what transpired back then, Dazai read Odasaku’s first report on the matter. Turns out Odasaku did in fact reach the gifted on time. He let him get away on purpose.

Why?
To gain his trust.

Odasaku had a vision in which he saw that the ability user he was up against was much deadlier than expected. Instead of following through with his original plan of engaging him in battle and capturing him so he could hand him over to the government, he decided to pretend to be a traitor, for he knew that he had no chance of prevailing if they fought. If he succeeded in convincing the ability user to introduce him to his organisation, he could gain more intelligence about the group, gather more evidence and increase the likelihood of the organisation getting the sentence they deserved. Dazai stopped for a few seconds to admire how efficiently Odasaku adapted in that situation, but he still had stuff to get through, so he moved on to the other reports.

Henceforth, Odasaku had several more meetings with his target, during which he provided them information about the Agency and helped them out with their endeavours, such as hiding from the authorities. Eventually, he infiltrated the organisation, which he referred to as the Belladonna School. Along the way, he also got to know another higher-up in the organisation, although he did not learn the leader’s name and was not allowed to meet up with them.

After his ‘induction’ into the organisation, Odasaku was set to go to Tokyo for several days to work on a project for them. That was when he was finally supposed to meet the leader. They were told that Odasaku was going to tell the Agency he was going on holiday and Fukuzawa even approved those holiday days to strengthen his cover. That was the time period during which Odasaku was not sure if he could keep the Agency in the loop.

His first major job as a ‘scholar’ of the Belladonna School was to meet up with them at a predetermined izakaya in Tokyo for an unspecified reason which would only be revealed after he arrived. Judging by the unusually messy handwriting, Odasaku must have written that in a hurry after being given little to no notice. That report had the date he stopped contacting anyone. The reports ended there.

All of Dazai’s fears materialised. Nothing he had just read astounded him because everything was precisely as he had surmised. Instantly, his brain started racing at a million miles an hour. He knew there had to be a way out of this, but that did little to alleviate the immediate anxiety spawned by the confirmation that his deduction was on the mark.

Thereupon, Dazai placed the folder back into the drawer and locked it before exiting the office.

When he returned home, he absent-mindedly made his way to his room. He was so far gone into his own world that he did not notice his door was firmly rather than loosely shut like he left it. Most of the next few hours was spent pacing from one side of the room to the other as he pondered on the most optimal course of action he could take, his thoughts jumbling up due to all the different facts and possibilities he had to account for.
That night, Dazai barely got any sleep. He spent most of it concocting a plan to protect the Agency and save Odasaku if need be without sacrificing Chuuya in the process.

‘Why are we going to a hotel?’ Chuuya asked once they got off the train in Tokyo after Dazai finally told him their destination, having waited the entire journey for Dazai to tell him why they were going to the capital. Once again, he was frustrated that his annoying jerk of a partner was definitely hiding something, if the fact that he sat opposite Chuuya so as to spend the train ride on his laptop without letting Chuuya have a look was anything to go by. Whatever it was, he fully intended to find out somehow.

‘To investigate.’

‘To investigate what? Do our culprits live there?’

‘…Something like that.’

The real answer was no. They were en route to the hotel Odasaku was staying at to inquire about what other discoveries he had made over the course of the past five days he had been in the city. His tiny partner had not worked out the connection between the two cases yet and frankly, it was much better if he was kept in the dark.

Upon reaching the hotel, the two teens casually stepped in and did their best to blend in. Chuuya tried to go talk to the receptionist to find out where to go, but Dazai took his hand and dragged him straight to the staircase before he got to her.

‘Let go of me,’ Chuuya whispered while stifling the temptation to slap Dazai’s hand away, for doing so would have drawn too much attention.

‘Only if you follow me quietly.’

‘I’ll only follow you if you explain yourself.’

Dazai released his hand to signify that he agreed to his terms and Chuuya promptly questioned him on the way to the first floor. ‘I was gonna’ ask the receptionist what room to go to before you stopped me, bastard! How will we work out where we need to go now?’

‘We don’t need to.’

Then, Dazai walked over to a room towards the end of the hallway and knocked on the door. No response. Shooting a quick glance around to ensure no one could see him, he crouched down in front of the door.

‘Oi, Dazai, what do you think you’re doing?’ Detectives were not supposed to break in without a warrant lest it was an emergency, but here his partner was, doing precisely that without there being an obvious crisis on the horizon.

‘Why, I’m granting us access to the room, of course,’ he replied while picking the lock.

‘You’ll show up breaking in on the cameras!’ Chuuya reminded him in an exasperated tone. If security came up, they would have to explain why they were committing a crime without
authorisation. How great.

‘Don’t worry about the cameras, they’re currently looping a minute of footage from an hour ago. As far as security is concerned, we aren’t even here.’

Chuuya watched him with confusion and scepticism. Firstly, Dazai knew where to go without asking anyone, and secondly, he had made sure they were not spotted. Something was up and he did not like it one bit.

The moment the door opened, a suitcase they had seen before came into view.

‘…This is Odasaku’s room.’ Even though there was little to nothing to indicate someone had rented the room around, the facts that Odasaku was on a case in Tokyo and his suitcase was there crossed out any other option.

‘Bingo.’

‘Why are we here and what does this have to do with our case?’

Had this been anyone but Chuuya, he would have shaken them off with his typical jokes and incoherent rambles. His strategies no longer worked on him, implying that he had to dodge the question instead. ‘I’ll tell you later. Let’s have a look around.’

Dazai intended to make his way into the room, but Chuuya grabbed him by the collar. ‘Listen, Dazai. I know there’s something you’re not telling me, and I’ve had enough of that shit. Either you tell me or I’m off to talk to those three on my own. Is this related to why you left in the middle of the night last night?’

Seems like the situation was worse than Dazai thought. He told nobody about his trip to the office because if anybody knew, especially Chuuya of all people, they might act in a way that exacerbated the problem. Consequently, he decided to make Chuuya give up by taking advantage of his anger issues. ‘Oh, no, the shrimp has started hallucinating! Do you need to talk to a psychiatrist?’

‘No, I haven’t, and it’s obviously you who needs a shrink! I went to your room after I heard the entrance door locking last night. The only reason why I didn’t follow you was that you weren’t within sight anymore by the time I checked you weren’t anywhere in the house.’

He stayed silent while carrying out the cost-benefit analysis mentally. On one hand, he could lie and say he was out drinking or meeting up with a girl. On the other hand, he doubted Chuuya would buy those excuses, though he could not divulge his thoughts on the matter either. As such, he had to strike a balance between truthfulness and withholding information. ‘Alright, I’ll be honest. I can’t tell you the full story. If I do, my plan is going to fall apart because you’re too rash and impulsive. Just trust me for now.’

Chuuya was suspicious about this whole ordeal at best, but he did trust Dazai. Above all, he opted to focus on the case, even if it meant having blind faith in a lunatic. ‘Okay, I’ll trust you. No matter what I do, you aren’t gonna’ tell me shit, so there’s no point in trying anymore. However, if you don’t justify yourself later, I’ll choke you to death.’

‘I wouldn’t mind that,’ Dazai said, sounding as ebullient as a child getting presents for their birthday.

With that, Chuuya retracted his hand and they had a look around the room. As they checked whether there was any sign of life in the room, Chuuya could not throw off the disquietude that
overwhelmed his heart whenever Dazai spoke like that.

‘This room doesn’t feel like a room that someone’s been living in for the past five days,’ Chuuya noted when they were done. No personal touches or objects could be found anywhere, as if Odasaku simply dumped his suitcase there and went elsewhere.

‘That’s because nobody has lived here for that long.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I believe Odasaku got into trouble while on his case, which is why he hasn’t contacted anyone since he came to Tokyo. Last night, I went to the office and flipped through his files. Can you guess who he was investigating?’

Chuuya supported an arm with the other and brought a finger up to his lips. ‘Well, he never told us what his case was about, but if it’s someone in Tokyo and we’re here ‘cause they’re linked to our case, it’s gotta’ be one of the people we’re dealing with. If I recall correctly, when we first talked to Ranpo, he ran off to catch an ability user who could “power up and fly”, but we never heard anything about them again. That description sounds quite like Mihai.’

Dazai applauded, wearing a pleased grin. ‘Bravo!’

‘Going by that logic, Mihai must know if something happened to Odasaku, so let’s go beat him up until he coughs up that information.’

There was still one task that had to be completed prior to approaching Mihai, so Dazai proposed they confirm Odasaku had disappeared before that. ‘Wait for me to verify when Odasaku was last seen first.’

Afterwards, they went back downstairs and Dazai struck up a conversation with the receptionist.

‘How may I help you, sir?’

‘Manami, isn’t it?’ Dazai began, having looked at her badge to get her name. ‘It would be of utmost help if you’d wrap your lithe fingers around my neck and strangle me quickly and gently!’ he stated while holding her hands and gazing at her with a smile and half-lidded eyes. In the meantime, Chuuya had to suppress the urge to sigh, facepalm and drag the lecher he was stuck with out the door.

The receptionist looked freaked out for a second before settling on the explanation that he must be joking and laughed. ‘Unfortunately, I can’t fulfil your request since my contract prohibits any personal contact with clients. So, what did you come here for?’

‘That doesn’t matter anymore, all that matters is that I’ve found you, the woman of my dreams!’

Each word made Chuuya angrier than the previous one. They had literally met minutes ago, for fuck’s sake! Had he not known the purpose of this was to gather information, he would have exited the building with Dazai instantly and would probably have hit him for being such a shameless degenerate while he was at it.

‘If there’s nothing I can help you with, I’m going to have to ask you to step aside so I can help the other customers.’

‘No, wait! The truth is, I’m here to meet up with a friend, but I went to his room and he isn’t there, and he isn’t picking up his phone either…’ Then, I got carried away when I laid my eyes upon your
supreme beauty.’

In the background, Chuuya did his best not to roll his eyes at the corniness. Continuing to ignore Dazai’s comments, Manami tackled the topic at hand. ‘What does your friend look like? I might be able to tell you if he’s left recently.’

‘He’s very tall with red hair. He’s been staying at this hotel for five days.’

Finally, an attempt at discovering useful information! Chuuya mentally thanked the heavens that Dazai was not fooling around any longer.

‘Oh, I remember him. On that day, he checked in around afternoon and left around 10 PM. He seemed to be in a hurry. I haven’t seen him since.’

Since asking if the other staff members had seen Odasaku would have been way too dubious, Dazai stopped there. ‘Thanks very much. Ah, your name fits you perfectly, for I can already see the beautiful love between us! Will you join me in the ultimate act of love and commit double suicide with me?’

‘Okay, that’s it.’ Chuuya had had enough, they were leaving and that was final. ‘Apologies for this leech, I’ll handle him. Now, if you’ll excuse us…’

Chuuya dragged Dazai outside so swiftly that Dazai almost lost his balance and would have fallen headfirst into the pavement had they not been hand in hand. ‘Was that all just an excuse for you to flirt and try to find a suicide partner?’

‘Partially.’

Chuuya groaned. What God had he pissed off so badly that he was cursed with a suicidal bandage-wasting pervert?

That evening, Dazai and Ango had already planned to meet up for some drinks at Lupin. Therefore, Dazai decided to bring up the case during their hangout rather than call an urgent meeting on the spot. After all, he now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was something in the case which would be of interest to Ango too.

‘How has your day been, Dazai?’ Ango asked as he took a sip of his drink.

Dazai downed a shot and put the glass down. ‘Not great. I spent the day at the office and investigating with Chuuya, but I was too concerned to enjoy it.’

‘What’s up?’

‘I think our current case is related to Odasaku’s disappearance.’

Ango watched him with surprise. ‘Disappearance?’

‘Yeah,’ Dazai nodded. ‘It’s already day five with no contact from Odasaku. I wouldn’t worry if it was only for a day or two, but I don’t think Odasaku would spend this long on a case without telling anyone what’s going on; he would find a way to keep us in the loop somehow. If the situation was so dire that he couldn’t contact people, he would try to finish it fast, meaning that he
would’ve wrapped up the case by now had he been in a position to do so. Chuuya and I confirmed he hasn’t been at his hotel ever since either.’

‘So, what you’re saying is…’

‘Indeed. Odasaku isn’t contacting us because he’s physically unable to. Something must have gone wrong during the investigation.’

‘How’s the Agency dealing with this?’

‘They haven’t realised it yet, which is probably for the better. I’d rather keep the Agency out of this. I fear that if they get involved, our lovely opponents will decide to employ extreme measures, and it might not end well, especially considering they still have Odasaku.’

Reading between the lines, Ango comprehended what Dazai wanted him to do. ‘Understood. How may I help?’

‘Are you sure? Won’t your boss be angry?’

‘I’m not doing this as a government worker, I’m doing this as a friend. What my boss doesn’t know can’t hurt him.’

‘I knew I could count on you, Ango!’ Dazai said with an exuberant grin.

Ango put on a gentle smile of his own. ‘Of course, Dazai. Odasaku is my friend too. He’s saved me many times, it’s only natural that I’d return the favour.’

‘I can’t refuse such a generous offer if you insist! To start off, Odasaku went missing while investigating a case in Tokyo. To be more specific, his case was in the Minato area. He was on the heels of an ability user he’s been following for three months. His mission was to join their organisation and bring them down from the inside. In order not to blow his cover after his induction, he went to Tokyo and warned us that he might not be able to contact us for a while. The last anyone heard of him was five days ago. On that night, there was a power outage and a fire at a restaurant in Minato simultaneously. Chuuya and I investigated the restaurant since we were assigned to that case. However, the case turned out to be a fake case; everyone involved worked together to create it and the suspect we were meant to find proof on doesn’t even exist.’

‘You can’t possibly mean –’

‘Exactly. Don’t tell anyone yet, though,’ he requested with a finger on his lips.

Ango nodded. ‘Noted. I’ll hack into the surrounding cameras and give you access to the security footage in Tokyo and around power stations.’

‘Thank you, Ango.’

‘Anytime. Well, then, I’m going to go get to work. I’ll message you and Chuuya when I’m done.’

Thankfully, Ango worked incredibly fast. Within two hours, Dazai and Chuuya had access to all the camera footage they necessitated. Out of gratitude, Dazai decided to pay for Ango’s drinks next time, but for now, they sat down in the living room and played the recordings on Dazai’s laptop.
Given that Chuuya knew Odasaku was involved somehow, Dazai suggested they start with the recordings on cameras around the areas where Odasaku had met Mihai. Originally, he was going to watch those parts alone, but since Chuuya had figured out that part on his own, it was useless to hide the connection between the two cases. As long as he did not catch on to the conclusive part of the case, it was no issue.

The first meeting was quite brief. Both parties appeared tense and wary of each other, which was ordinary in their circumstances. If the boys had to guess, they were betting on the first meeting being an interview of some sort. When the verbal exchange which they could not hear ended, Mihai called someone. He proceeded to repeat that process after every meeting with Odasaku.

As they had access to days of footage, they fast-forwarded through them to follow the people in their own case too, which unearthed an interesting pattern. The meetings between Mihai and Odasaku were always in the morning or evening and Mihai was not sighted anywhere on the cameras at any other time of day, not even to see Veronica. They did have to admit that none of the four people they had met over the course of their case were seen on cameras often, though, as if they were taking paths without camera coverage purposefully.

Speaking of Veronica, she was always with Michele, though they never had any non-platonic interactions. They were only ever apart if Mihai was with her. And whenever Donatien was anywhere near either Mihai or Veronica, everything seemed… strained. Even Michele, who was supposedly Donatien’s boss, was on edge when he was around, especially if Veronica was in the room. Their dynamics were bizarre, to say the least.

Besides that, not much else was unanticipated. Chuuya’s conclusion about Pierre was confirmed since there was no sign of the man in the picture Michele gave them near the restaurant, the flat or the people they had met. Meanwhile, Odasaku and Mihai’s subsequent meetings were just as Odasaku had described in the reports Dazai had read, consisting of him completing various minor jobs for the Belladonna School to prove he was trustworthy. Eventually, they got to the day when Odasaku went to Tokyo.

Thanks to the receptionist, they knew to skip straight to roughly 10 PM on the night of the fire. That is when they saw Odasaku emerging out of the hotel and hailing a cab. He got off in front of an izakaya. The izakaya was packed, which would have made it difficult to keep track of Odasaku had he not towered over most people. Inside, Mihai was waiting for him at a table, and half an hour later, Odasaku departed after Mihai handed him an unknown object in a bag.

From this point forward, Odasaku walked around aimlessly for an hour or so. Trying to get rid of any people who might be tailing him, perhaps. Ultimately, he got to a power station and sneaked in, not avoiding the cameras intentionally.

Several minutes after Odasaku went into the power station, the recording stopped, which could only mean one thing.

The one who had caused the power outage was Odasaku.

In other words, Odasaku’s first major mission as a member of the Belladonna School was to cause a power outage from the source.

When the power was back on, Odasaku was not visible on any cameras whatsoever. Dazai rewound the recording over and over again, but he could not spot anything. The cameras made it look like Odasaku simply evaporated into thin air while at the power station. What if Odasaku was not even alive anymore? His hand started to shake at that thought as his brain attempted to cope with the possibility that it might be too late.
‘Give me that,’ Chuuya said and took the mouse. He changed the camera lens through which they were looking a few times, searching for something. Speedily, he analysed each camera near the power station minutes before and after the power outage until one caught his eye. On the screen, a vague hint of a figure hiding in the shadows could be seen. In addition, he identified a car which was in the area prior to the power outage, but which had vanished during the blackout. He zoomed in on the camera with the silhouette, which revealed the outline of a person they both knew.

He turned to Dazai and spoke in a resolute tone. ‘We’ve gotta’ find Mihai.’

His partner, having calmed down due to Chuuya’s quick thinking bringing him reassurance that Odasaku might not be dead yet, inhaled deeply and gathered his thoughts. A short pause later, he had their next move planned. ‘Luckily, he’s already been found for us.’

Chuuya looked at him, perplexed. ‘What do you mean?’

Dazai pulled out a tracking app on his phone and showed Chuuya the screen. ‘When I shook his hand last night, I distracted him with my badge and placed a tracker on his handcuff. Time has passed since, so I don’t expect him to still wear those clothes, but chances are that wherever his clothes are is where he’s hiding.’

Following the tracking app, they ended up in front of an izakaya which Odasaku’s case files mentioned previously and which both of them had seen earlier. Said place had been the first and last location where Odasaku had met Mihai.

Dazai led the way into the izakaya. The signal on his phone claimed the tracker was somewhere above them, most likely in one of the flats upstairs. As luck would have it, the izakaya was not on the bottom floor of a normal block-of-flats, denoting that the entire building was owned by one person and there was no upstairs access without the owner’s consent.

Such hurdles were no match for Dazai and Chuuya, though. Not with Dazai the master lockpick on the team, albeit not even the most skilled of lockpicks can slip into an off-limits area unnoticed if people’s eyes are on them.

Realising they cannot go upstairs as the risk of being noticed and stopped was too high, but that using their badges and legal privileges might not be the best idea since the staff might also be allied with their enemy, Dazai whispered to his partner. ‘Chuuya, I need you to cause a distraction. While people are distracted, I’ll do my part, and when I’m done, get away and come join me before the distraction is over.’

‘How the fuck do you expect me to come up with a distraction on the spot?’ Chuuya whispered back in an irritated tone.

‘This is your chance to prove your brain isn’t as underdeveloped as your stature, shorty. If you’re so smart, I’m sure you’ll be able to do it.’ He waved him goodbye casually, wearing an infuriating gleeful smile.

Chuuya cursed under his breath and swore that he would have a go at the shitty douchebag he lived with when they got home. Until then, he had to think. Ugh, he really was in no mood to think, he merely wanted to kick Dazai into the floor, not that he could do so in a public place.
On second thought, that was an amazing idea!

Even though he could not engage with Dazai in any way possible for the sake of the case, he could still start a fight. And so, he went to the shadiest man in the bar side of the izakaya, a drunk tattooed man who basically had ‘gang member’ written all over him and who was surrounded by men of similar calibre.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ Chuuya said to draw his attention.

The man looked at him in drunken stupor. ‘Whaddya want, kid? I ain’t got no time for lil’ runts like you unless you’re sellin’.

‘I was waiting for my food when I overheard that guy over there,’ he pointed at the second shadiest-looking group at the bar, ‘calling you names and talking disrespectfully about your wife.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He called you a gullible tosser and said your wife’s a dirty slut.’ Observing the wedding ring and how the man boiled with rage when his wife was mentioned in such a context, Chuuya kept on with that route. ‘He claims to have fucked your wife several times and went into very descriptive detail about what they did with his buddies, so I thought you deserve to know.’

To claim that the man was furious would be an understatement. His face went red with rage and he smashed the glass he had been holding with his bare hands. ‘Ta for lettin’ me know, you’re a good kid. I’ll take care of him.’

Immediately, he sprang up from his seat and stomped to the other group, commencing a screaming match and pulling a knife on the man indicated by Chuuya the moment he got to them. ‘How fuckin’ dare you spread rumours ‘bout me wife? I’ll kill you and your stupid family and feed you to the rats!’

Fortunately for Chuuya, the other man had a temper to rival the person he had roped into this. ‘Huh? That’s tosh! I haven’t said fuck all ‘bout your wife, mate!’

‘You bloody did and now you deny it?! My wife’s no cheater, and she definitely wouldn’t shag the likes of you!’

‘I fuckin’ didn’t, but maybe if you’re so insistent, she’s really a world-renowned sket with a meathead of a husband!’

The two groups began fighting one another. Not long passed and the fight descended into a bar-wide fight with tableware flying around. Those who did not want to get caught in the crossfire moved to the other area of the izakaya and several patrons outright left. The staff were all busy trying to break up the fight and assure the customers that the situation was under control. Taking that as his cue, Chuuya mingled with the crowd until he reached the now open door leading to the first floor and chased after Dazai.

‘You were faster than I predicted,’ Dazai exclaimed when Chuuya entered his periphery. He was standing in front of a door, ready to knock.

Chuuya felt smugger than he had been in forever at the thought that he had managed to outdo Dazai by rising above his expectations. ‘Adjust your predictions accordingly next time.’

‘Well done, I’ll reward you with a pat on the head later,’ Dazai teased while knocking on the door. He was evidently mocking him, but for the briefest of moments, Chuuya could swear he sounded
proud too.

‘Don’t you dare!’ As much as Chuuya hated it, he did feel joy at the praise, but he shook that passing thought away to concentrate on combat if necessary.

Seconds later, Mihai opened the door cautiously.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked, thinly veiled nervousness apparent in his voice.

‘We have our ways,’ Dazai replied cheerfully. ‘This much is nothing for detectives like us.’

Mihai narrowed his eyes and spoke in the most threatening manner he could muster. ‘Leave now if you don’t want to die.’

The response he received was a roar of laughter from Dazai. ‘Surely, you must be joking. You can’t lift a finger against us at the moment. You would’ve attacked Chuuya by now if you could.’

‘Just because I haven’t done anything yet, it doesn’t mean I can’t.’

‘I can’t deny that, but your ability, The Morning Star, doesn’t give you that much freedom, does it?’

Both Chuuya and Mihai looked at Dazai in shock. Neither had the faintest idea how he knew that information, and the revelation that he possessed such knowledge made Chuuya wonder why he had not told him about that.

Seeing their reactions, Dazai continued with a self-confident grin. ‘Another name for The Morning Star is The Evening Star. Last night, when you looked out the window during the fight, you were checking how long you have left until you can’t use your ability anymore; it was starting to get dark, which is why you said you don’t have much time. When you left, it wasn’t due to people noticing the destruction, it was due to evening turning into night. I’ve also seen you around in the morning, though. In consequence, while your ability is extremely strong, the drawback is that you can only use it in the morning and evening. You’re completely powerless otherwise. It’s now nighttime, so you aren’t a threat. Not for several more hours, at least.’

‘That isn’t –’ Mihai started, only to be interrupted by Dazai.

‘Yes, it is. Don’t lie, it’s too late for that.’ Then, he put on an alarmingly friendly smile. ‘If you want to know how I can be so certain, let’s sit down and have a chat, shall we?’

Despite being crept out and astonished, Mihai recognised that Dazai’s suggestion was actually a demand. Having no way to get out of this, he gave in and let them into the studio flat. ‘What do you want to talk about?’

‘Various things! But before we begin…’ Dazai said while turning to his partner. ‘Chuuuya, go stand guard outside,’ Dazai ordered in a decisive tone.

‘Why? It’s much safer for me to stay with you while you talk to him.’ While Dazai’s reasoning was sound, they had not confirmed the restrictions on Mihai’s ability yet, so he would rather not leave his partner’s side.

‘Well, it’s going to be anything but safe if an enemy walks in and interrupts my negotiation, won’t it? As you’ve so helpfully pointed out, I’d be useless on guard duty, so you’re the one who needs to be on the lookout. Besides, even if he could use his ability right now, his ability is nothing I can’t handle, albeit it’s clearly too much for you.’
Chuuya turned around with a scoff, still unhappy about how their previous fight played out. ‘Fine. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.’ Then, he exited the flat.

Once Chuuya was gone, Dazai’s expression darkened considerably, as if all light had been consumed by an empty abyss. The next time he spoke, both his eyes and voice were serious, sombre and colder than ice. ‘Now, it’s time for the real talk to begin.’

How Dazai switched so radically made Mihai come to the unsettling realisation that he was dealing with a kid far worse than he had believed, but it was not as if he had any other variant except for doing as told, so he got straight to the point. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I know who you really are.’ Upon hearing those words, Mihai stiffened, and panic showed up all over his face. ‘I’ve known from the very beginning. And I know who Donatien and Michele… no, Miguel are too.’

‘How…?’

‘Your group made a miscalculation. You did catch on regarding how Odasaku found out who you all are, not to mention he had been getting in your way, hence why you couldn’t let him roam free and took him out of the picture before Miguel handed us the fake case. In a worst-case scenario, you could’ve also negotiated a trade to get what you want as long as you had Odasaku. I believe that was a reasonable course of action, for with someone who’s aware of your real identities at the Agency, Miguel couldn’t even have approached us. Even when he did, he used an alias and wore a hat to hide his face from the cameras in case someone recognised him. What you didn’t guess was that Odasaku wasn’t the only detective of the Armed Detective Agency who knew your identities to begin with.’

‘I see. Is that how you knew I intended to drug you as well?’

‘No, I was prepared in case Donatien did that when we interviewed him. I hadn’t guessed your implication in the case at that point, but it just so happened that the interrogations were back-to-back.’

‘I assume you must’ve worked out our goal, then.’

‘Yes, I have. Your goal is why I came to a certain conclusion.’

‘What would that be?’

‘You aren’t the ones pulling the strings.’

He gulped. This kid was even smarter than he imagined, and he was not sure if he was amazed or scared. ‘…What gave it away?’

‘My first hint was how smoothly you’ve been avoiding detection. What sealed the deal was the smoke grenade. You use the same type and brand.’ He explained that in an assertive and calm tone to hide that he had settled on telling him a partial truth. The biggest indicatives were actually the findings at what was designed to look like Pierre’s flat, but if Mihai did not know about them, Dazai was not going to impart that knowledge.

‘Oh, I understand. Yesterday, you were merely telling me what we wanted you to think.’

Dazai nodded and clasped his hands together. ‘Yep, that’s right! Allow me to tell you the real explanation of the events in this case rather than the make-believe I told you yesterday. You didn’t buy Odasaku’s traitor act, but you pretended you did, aiming to get rid of him to reach your
objective. You succeeded, which is when Miguel’s role began. Even so, you needed a case to approach us, which is why you fabricated the whole case with arson, theft and embezzlement and blamed it on someone who doesn’t exist. After all, planting evidence against one of your own could've landed one of you in trouble, so you needed a scapegoat, but you couldn't accuse a real human in case it backfired. You had help with the documents certifying your and Donatien’s fake employment and the ownership of the restaurant supposedly being transferred to Miguel six months ago, when in reality, I bet it wasn’t even a month ago. Shortly before giving us the case, at least one of you rigged the flat and restaurant with fake evidence that we could latch on to, proceeding to make Odasaku cause a power outage while one of you set fire to the restaurant and another one knocked out and took Odasaku. With all the preparations in place, it was time to talk to the Armed Detective Agency. From the moment we met Miguel, there was no doubt he was sent to make us fall for a trap, considering who he is. Miguel claimed not to have any idea what his so-called ‘employee’ thinks of the made-up gifted in order to lead us to Donatien, who would solidify the notion that Pierre was guilty and point us to you. Due to your ability’s limitations, Donatien met up with us in the evening to coerce us to go to you during a time when you aren’t powerless. You were ordered to drug us while we questioned you. However, your scheme was foiled as neither of us drank, at which point you attacked.’

Mihai smiled in awe. ‘I shouldn’t have underestimated the Armed Detective Agency.’

‘That’s true, but that isn’t what I’m here to discuss. I’m here to offer you an alliance.’

‘And why would I be interested in that?’ he replied with a chuckle, although his tone betrayed curiosity and interest.

Dazai smirked in a chilly ominous manner. ‘One word: Veronica.’

Being taken aback, Mihai struggled to keep his voice neutral. ‘What about her?’

‘You love Veronica, don’t you? It would be a shame if anything were to happen to her... which is why you’ve aligned yourself with the Belladonna School. You’re protecting her, not just from external factors, but also from the organisation itself, hence why you keep her around Miguel. His ability, Don Cervantes, is more than enough to ensure her safety, and it isn’t limited to approximately eight hours a day like yours. Considering the nature of his ability, it’s likely his personality is up to par as well, so he’s bound to accept if you ask for help.’

Mihai’s visage softened. ‘Yeah, he’s honourable enough for that.’

‘It’s great that you know someone like that, but I can’t help wondering why that’s even necessary. Logically speaking, in a normal organisation, its members and their contacts are protected. The only explanation remaining is that your organisation doesn’t operate like that, most likely due to its leader. You wouldn’t join such an organisation lest you had no choice because you care about Veronica too much. In accordance with these assumptions, the one you’re protecting Veronica from is none other than the leader of the organisation, who forced you to work for them in the first place, isn’t it?’

He averted his eyes to mask the sadness in them. ‘And what are you going to do now that you know that? There’s no escape, so this whole conversation is pointless.’ When he spoke, he sounded sorrowful, as if he had resigned to his fate.

‘Yes, there is,’ Dazai declared, sounding like he had said the most obvious and least uncertain thing ever. ‘Help us on this case and we will put the cause of your problems behind bars. After he’s in jail, you won’t have to be afraid in regard to Veronica’s safety anymore. The Armed Detective Agency is strong enough to win, not to mention what will occur when the Special Ability
Department will be embroiled. If you’re on our side, Veronica will be alright since she’s done nothing wrong, and with your contribution to the investigation, you’ll get off scot-free. The government is already looking for your organisation everywhere; it’s only a matter of time before you get caught anyway. Why risk being separated from your loved one when you could get rid of the reason why you can’t be happy together? I already have a plan to make this work, and if you join in, you’ll be free of your shackles and ready to begin your new life with Veronica within days.’

After a minute of contemplating the offer, Mihai opened his mouth. ‘In that case… I’ll help you.’

Chapter End Notes

Fun facts:
I named the imaginary guy Pierre because it was the most standard French name I could come up with. I wanted to hint at the fact that he does not exist by making him sound like the most average guy ever (brown hair, brown eyes, typical name, etc). Dazai claims not to be good with computers in the Untold Origins novel.
Manami’s name is spelt with the characters for ‘love’ and ‘beauty’, hence Dazai’s comment.
Miguel is Miguel de Cervantes (obviously). I chose the alias ‘Michele Severino’ for him as a hint at his real identity since Michele is evidently the Italian equivalent of Miguel and Severino sounded relatively similar to Cervantes.
Miguel’s ability is called ‘Don Cervantes’ instead of ‘Don Quixote’ because Fitzgerald’s ability is called ‘The Great Fitzgerald’ rather than ‘The Great Gatsby’.
Mihai is based on Mihai Eminescu, a romantic Romanian poet. His ability’s name, ‘Luceafărul’, means ‘The Morning Star/The Evening Star’, which you might recognise as a poetic way of referring to Venus. I picked him because I knew only Romanians would know who he is, so there is no chance of him appearing in canon and contradicting my portrayal of him here later on. Oh, and in the previous chapter’s notes, I decided to explain how to pronounce the ‘mi’ in his name with ‘mint’ because ‘mint’ means ‘I’m lying/I lie’ in Romanian, which is kind of what Dazai did when he explained what the case was meant to seem like lol.
The romance between Mihai and Veronica is based on the real romance between Mihai Eminescu and Veronica Micle.

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