

## What The Hand, Dare Seize The Fire

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# What The Hand, Dare Seize The Fire

by [jehanjetaime](#)

## Summary

Nakajima Atsushi has always been drawn to things that hurt him. As a young child, he had surely loved his parents. He had adored the other children at the orphanage, and even when the Headmaster and others had harped on him, Atsushi had craved their attention, their approval.

So when a man he has learned to work with despite their vast differences surprises him one night, Atsushi has to figure out why he runs towards things that are bad for him, and if he is going to keep making the same mistake. Or if it is a mistake at all.

## Notes

So I don't know how long this will be, but the idea's been biting at me lately, of Atsushi who is feeling things for Akutagawa but is self-aware enough to know that such a man is probably not the best choice for him. This should be an adventure!

## A Prologue

Rain fell cold and hard on the streets of Yokohama. The skies had been gray and wet for days, but this was the evening they had decided to finally open up and burden the city with rain so heavy and persistent that pockets and purses vibrated with the same notification - *'Flash Flood Warning! Possible rise in water levels due to rain. Travel with caution!'* All along the sidewalks, people ducked into shops. Students checked their wallets, looking for any extra yen for a snack while they waited; salary workers tapped at their phones, texting loved ones that they would be home a little bit later than usual.

Along the street, a dutiful delivery worker made his rounds, not seeming to mind the rain and asking for people to step aside with a polite voice and a smile when he had to push past crowded awnings to make his delivery. He thought of home, of his wife, daughter, and dog, and hoped that dinner would be gyudon. A cold night like this was perfect for gyudon.

A kitten cried in an alleyway, batting at a door. She had been living half-inside, half outside of a bookshop, and today she was incessantly demanding that she be let in. After a moment, the bookshop owner opened the door. He was a cranky looking old man, but he bent to pick the kitten up, cradling her to his chest. The door closed on him telling her not to get used to this. The lights flicked off in the bookshop, then flicked on upstairs a couple minutes later. The cat, now fluffed dry, appeared in the window to watch everyone who hadn't been as lucky as her.

There was a beautiful sunset, but behind the the clouds and rain, no one could see it. The parks emptied out of any stragglers as the shopping mall filled up, employees preparing for an onslaught of bored shoppers who had not come out with the idea of shopping, but were now forced to seek shelter somewhere. *Why don't we stop in here?* a mother said to her already screaming children. A toy store employee greeted them with a smile that hid her distaste for the shrieking brats. At least this woman might buy something to shut them up, and she would get another sale on her register.

In a coffee shop, regular customers hardly noticed the rain. As usual they watched the news on a television in the corner, debating economic policy, political scandal, and the occasional public interest story. A teenage boy studied in one booth while the man who owned the place scrubbed down the counter.

A heavy flash of lightning cracked through the sky, making anyone sheltering under metal awnings or trees scuttle off in search of safer accommodations. Energy was palpable in the air, and already young children whispered about the power going out. Would they be safe in the dark? Would it be out for a long time? Would they have to go to school tomorrow if the power was out? Adults were not so concerned, urging their children to finish their homework, practice for their recitals, clean their rooms.

The city was privately bustling.

Sitting on the stoop of an abandoned building, wondering if the Port Mafia clean up crew would come out even in weather like this, Nakajima Atsushi felt the rain splash on his outstretched fingers. Yes, the city was certainly in a rare mood that night.

Atsushi sighed and closed his eyes, wondering what it meant that this storm had happened on the night that Akutagawa Ryunosuke had kissed him.

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“What’s with that look?”

Atsushi darted his head up, drawing tired eyes from the report he was having trouble writing. Despite his love of reading and writing, it often gave him problems. Kanji blurred together, strokes seemed to switch themselves when he wasn’t looking, and sometimes things that were very easy for other people to read were difficult for him. He didn’t mind pushing past that, though; it made every book he finished feel like a victory. Still, it meant that sometimes his report writing went very slowly. Surprisingly, Kunikida was very thoughtful with him, sitting down and helping him at the beginning, and now offering corrections when he found them. Maybe he hadn’t been such a terrible teacher after all.

It was not Kunikida talking to him, though. Dazai was watching him from the adjacent desk, elbow on a binder, chin on his hands. That desk was always a mess, even more so now that it was holding a few framed photos of Dazai and his boyfriend, and one of his boyfriend’s ugly hairless cat. Atsushi wasn’t so sure about the red-headed Port Mafia executive, who was intense and a bit terrifying, but Dazai always had periods of up and down, and the ups seemed to last longer with him around - and Nakahara was often around, wandering in and out of the Agency office at will.

That had less to do with his relationship with Dazai and more to do with relations between the Port Mafia and the Armed Detective Agency. With the death of Ogai Mori, the Port Mafia had fallen to the care of Ozaki Kouyou. Atsushi knew that she didn’t like him, but her healing relationship with Kyoka and a tense but successful alliance with Fukuzawa seemed to balance her out. Balance the Port Mafia out, allowing them to work together with the Agency on easier terms.

Hence why Atsushi and Akutagawa had been working together the previous night. His lips still felt as if they were on fire.

“Helloooo, Atsushiiii,” Dazai said, waving a hand in his face. “You’re so far away today!”

“Oh, sorry.” Atsushi shook his head to banish the fog. “Just thinking. Did you need something?”

An easy smile spread on Dazai’s face. “I was just wondering where you were! Where were you in that grey little head of yours?”



By now, Atsushi knew that Dazai was not asking for any innocent reason. Nothing Dazai did was innocent. “I’m just making sure I remembered everything from last night. If my report and Akutagawa’s don’t match we’ll have to have a meeting about it, and I don’t want that.”

Dazai just gave him an incomprehensible look. “Keep an eye on that one.”

“I’ve fought against him *and* by his side enough to know what he’s capable of, Dazai.” It was true. He had been stabbed through by Akutagawa, and shielded from bullets by him. The man had grabbed him in midair and saved his life, minutes after stepping on him and verbally destroying him. Atsushi had been sliced to ribbons by Akutagawa, and just last night, both bloody and bruised, Akutagawa had grabbed him by the lapels and kissed him. It had been surprisingly soft and gentle, softer than Atsushi had ever guessed his almost-partner could be. Then he had disappeared, leaving without another word. Maybe Atsushi didn’t know Akutagawa as well as he had thought.

With a shrug, Dazai turned back to his desk, and Atsushi looked back down at his report.

Akutagawa had always been a monster to Atsushi, who had long ago stopped holding back when it came time to retaliate. He knew that he had hurt Akutagawa, not only in their fights, but just by existing in Dazai’s light. Atsushi was not absolved of blame. How could he be? The blood that ran in his very veins was guilt. Still, Akutagawa had done terrible things to him, to Kyoka, said things that were monstrous and untrue, tried to break Atsushi body and spirit.

Yet Atsushi couldn’t stop thinking about that kiss.

What was wrong with him?

# A Moment

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Akutagawa sighed as he dried his hair after his shower. He was sitting on his bed - black, simple, easy, and definitely not a futon - and thinking. Or really, trying not to think.

He was usually so in control of himself. When it came to the weretiger, though, he had always been a little...on edge, he supposed. Usually, that just meant a lowered level of patience, a more violent touch, and letting his urge to beat the guy to death overpower him just a little. Even when they were working together. Especially when they were working together.

Except this time it had come out as something he had been pushing down for a disgustingly long time. The few times that stupid tiger had shown him even the smallest bit of kindness had latched onto his heart and forced it to stop beating again. So Akutagawa had kissed him.

And the weretiger hadn't kissed back. Despite what Akutagawa had started to take for almost playful banter during missions, and the ease with which they both took shots at the hardest parts of each other's lives...Akutagawa had been mistaken. So, having completed the mission and made a fool of himself, Akutagawa had left. He couldn't just sit there and wait for the clean up crew in awkward silence after having completely ruined his own life. How was he ever going to face the weretiger again? With a snarl and a staunch denial that the situation had ever happened, he supposed.

On his nightstand, his phone buzzed. A text from Gin, demanding to know what was wrong with him. Yes, he had been a little testy, but that wasn't out of the norm. There was a sudden fear in his gut that his sister had been trailing them and had seen the kiss.

No. If she had seen that, Akutagawa had a distinct feeling that the weretiger would have been bleeding out through a sliced jugular right about now. He remembered being young, and trying to hold a boy's hand. When the boy had pulled away and called him gross, Gin - in all of her toddler fury - had come barrelling out of nowhere and started to pummel the boy with her fists. The weretiger was alive; Gin didn't know.

If there was a God, he was laughing at Akutagawa. In love with a man and couldn't even call him by his name. Was this love? Akutagawa didn't know. But he knew that the the weretiger - Atsushi - made him feel things that no one else ever did. Not just anger or disgust anymore, but desire, sometimes something that might have been joy, satisfaction after a decent mission, the urge to know what the weretiger was doing even when they weren't together. And he thought that was love. Love wasn't anything he pretended to understand, but...Akutagawa wanted to spend time with Atsushi, became angry when he was injured, and thought that the world looked a little less dark when he smiled.

Perhaps Kyoka wasn't such a damn fool.

Perhaps Akutagawa was.

He flopped back on the bed and closed his eyes. Life was a nightmare and there was no waking up.

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Atsushi was thankful for the mission. It was simple, a run with Dazai - picking up something left for a low level smuggler before he got there and apprehend him when he arrived. He had been surprised when the smuggler had shown up with a group of thugs. That provided more of a struggle than he had expected, but honestly the cracking of his bones as he transformed, destroying his sleeves and shoes, was a welcome relief.

He was torn up on the inside, always had been, feeling it that night more than ever. It was only fitting to be torn up on the outside.

Atsushi didn't have the bloodlust Akutagawa did, but he was still a fighter. A tiger was made to hunt, after all. He remembered transforming.

And then, he was back at the Agency. Dazed, confused, body aching in the way it only did after a visit with Yosano. What he didn't understand was why. He raised his hand, freeing it from the blanket to cover his eyes from the morning sun.

"And our little gore machine wakes," Dazai said from somewhere nearby.

Atsushi lowered his hand, then pushed himself up onto his elbows. Dazai was sitting at the end of his bed, book open but eyes on Atsushi. He had a mysterious smile. Atsushi rubbed the back of his neck. "What...what happened?"

The book snapped shut. "We were hoping you would tell us. You know, it was an awful lot of work for me to explain why I had to carry you some, soaked in blood, from a routine mission."

"Soaked in...blood? I remember the smuggler arriving with his cronies, but then..."

"Oh, Atsushi! You don't even remember going on a rampage? You decimated those men he brought with him. One of them was even in your mouth and you don't recall a thing?" Dazai shook his head. "Kunikida won't believe that."

His heart sank into his stomach, and he became aware of the taste of copper layered with self-disgust. "I did that? But why? They didn't seem like that much of a threat."

"I didn't think so either, but I had to nullify you before you went too far." Dazai stood and walked to the head of the bed. "Something's odd with you lately."

A gentle hand lay on his forehead. Before he could respond, someone knocked on the door. Dazai pulled his hand away just as Kyoka poked her head in through the door. She came right

over to the other side of Atsushi's bed and took his hand. "You're awake. Are you alright?"

"He's better than ever now that you're here, Kyoka," Dazai said. "I'll leave him in your capable hands."

When they were alone, Kyoka sat at Atsushi's side, barely taking up any room in the bed. She held his hand in her lap. "What happened?" she asked, eyes full of concern.

"I...don't know. I don't remember." Atsushi was still feeling fuzzy. It was not like him to lose control, not in this form and not as the tiger. He had learned such control of his ability, nothing like the days when he transformed without his consent or knowledge. "I haven't blacked out during a transformation since joining the Agency. Usually I have full awareness when I'm transformed, but this time..."

Kyoka pressed the back of her fingers to his forehead. "Maybe you should talk to the President about it."

"That might be a good idea." He was wise, older, and trustworthy. But Atsushi didn't know if he needed to bother Fukuzawa for something so minor - he was a busy person, and Atsushi's problem was so small. It might not have been a problem at all, just a one tiny thing. He wouldn't bring it up quite yet. "Maybe I'm just feeling sick. I'll feel better after a little rest."

The way Kyoka's mouth was set told him that she didn't like his answer, but she didn't push it. Atsushi was glad for that. He let her hold his hand. This was nice, honestly. When he was touched, he shouldn't want to pull away. Kyoka's touch did not frighten him. Dazai's pettings never reviled him, and even with his rough hands, Kunikida's touches were no source of tension. That was how it should be.

But then again. Akutagawa's touches no longer instilled fear in him, either. Even when they fought, even when Akutagawa had given him a countdown to his own death, Atsushi no longer feared his touch. The same way he had not feared that kiss.

That was the problem, he supposed. He had not feared that kiss. He had liked that kiss. Atsushi had not wanted that kiss to end. Yet he should have. His heart should not pick up speed at the memory. This had always been his pattern. When someone offered abuse and joy both, he would stick around through any pain or suffering for a taste of the pleasure. He had let the Headmaster say anything he wanted in hopes that the good behaviour would earn him a kind word, stayed quiet as they beat him for the chance of a small touch of comfort after. On the rare occasions the other kids talked to him, Atsushi had thought that just suffering their abuses might show them that he was worthy enough to play with them.

He still thought like that, which was why he couldn't stand the way he had liked that kiss. It was dangerous.

"Atsushi, what are you thinking about?"

He jumped; Atsushi had zoned out, forgetting about Kyoka. "Sorry. I'm just tired."

"Go back to bed," she said softly. "You need your rest."

Maybe he did. Atsushi needed something.

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“Oi, Akutagawa!”

The rough voice of his superior drew Akutagawa’s attention as he walked down the hall. He stopped and turned to face Nakahara, who as always had a cocky look on his face. “Yes?”

“We got something from the Agency. I guess their tiger boy nearly slaughtered a bunch of smugglers that turned out to be related to that Ueno woman you were hunting down.” Nakahara all but slapped the flash drive into Akutagawa’s hand, the leather of his gloves soft and pliable with use. “Compare the notes from that mission with that one you ran and see if we don’t have something.”

“Of course.” He would think of saying ‘no’ to a superior. Yet, still. “Do they really need us for something this minor?”

Nakahara rolled one shoulder. “You know how those good samaritans are. We always have to give them that push.” Even Akutagawa noticed the new fondness in his voice - slight, but there - while talking about the Agency. About Dazai. He didn’t like to think about their relationship. Especially not now. “Might be bigger than we originally thought. Get back to me as quick as possible.”

Akutagawa nodded and stored the flash drive in his pocket. Business done, Nakahara nudged Akutagawa with his shoulder and walked past.

“Is he okay?”

Everything seemed to freeze. Akutagawa wondered who asked the question. When Nakahara turned around, one brow cocked, the dark realization crept through Akutagawa’s veins. He had been the one to ask.

“Who?” Nakahara said, hands in his pockets. “The tiger? Yeah, he’s fine. It’s all in the report.”

Another nod from Akutagawa. He made sure to keep his mouth shut, and didn’t leave the hallway until Nakahara was gone. *Idiot*, he thought to himself as he stormed in the opposite direction. *You let some stupid crush leak into your work, into the world that matters. So what if the weretiger was injured? Who cares?*

When he sat down to read the report, though, he found that he cared. Or, that is, found himself able to admit it. Because apparently the weretiger had taken a man’s arm off and nearly disemboweled another one. Normally, Akutagawa would have just huffed disbelief that the weretiger was finally doing a job right. This was different, though. If a fight called for that type of violence, he had never seen the weretiger fail to deliver. Judging from the

report, though - painfully clear that it was Dazai's work, to the point but flippant - the smuggler and his goons had not been worth that force. Seven men, with a gun a piece? Not even the weretiger was bad enough at his job to need use force of that magnitude to subdue seven men. Yet he had fully transformed, forcing Dazai to nullify the beast. And apparently, he remembered nothing. Akutagawa had fought alongside him enough to know that transforming didn't wipe his memory.

Something was strange. But he would force himself to do his work. It didn't matter. This was none of Akutagawa's concern.

Atsushi had made that very clear.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Thing should pick up (and the chapters should be longer) starting with the next update!

# A Plan

## Chapter Summary

Thank you everyone for all of these amazing comments; I hope I can keep this up to snuff! <3

Kunikida slammed a manila folder down on Atsushi's desk. The sudden force made him jump, heart racing in his thin chest. "K...kunikida?"

"Those smugglers you destroyed have turned out to be an even worse problem than we thought," Kunikida said in his usual rough way. "Look this over - it contains information about a woman named Ueno Hana, who the Port Mafia had a run in with recently. Apparently her name is connected to a series of kidnappings that overlapped with some Mafia operation a month ago."

"Kidnappings?" Atsushi didn't like the sound of that. He opened the folder to start looking through the files.

Dazai heaved a sigh. "Kunikida, I am hurt. I am beyond hurt! I am betrayed!"

"What are you talking about, you fool?" Kunikida's long arms were folded over his chest, fingers tapping against his elbow.

"You delivered a report to Atsushi but not me! I was an integral part of the mission!" Dazai leaned back in his chair and raised his arms. "Yet here I am, with no report!"

"You wouldn't read it anyways," Atsushi pointed out.

Kunikida nodded. "Not only that, but the last time I gave you a paper report, you shredded it, mixed it with glitter, and mailed it back to me! I'm still trying to get glitter off of my floor! You get digital copies only now. Check your email for once."

"I don't even know my password," Dazai whined.

From across the room, a plastic rag rustled. "It's Slug0804," Ranpo said. "It's really too easy, you should change it."

"But then how would I be able to rely on you to help me get in to easily? You're a lifesaver, Ranpo." The office was filled with swift *click-clacks* as Dazai noisily logged on to his email.

And a moment later, his voice popped up again, more serious this time. "She was attempting to kidnap children with abilities?"

“That’s what it seems like,” Atsushi said, shuffling the papers around his desk. Kyoka leaned over and he scooted to the side, letting her see. It was nice to just have a mission and work to focus on, really. “With all of the orphans around here, though, she could easily be taking any of them and no one would be any the wiser...”

“That’s what it says down here. Who wrote this report? It’s atrociously detailed, but it does say that she might strike out that way. It’s no wonder the Mafia would care, honestly - they harvest traumatized souls from Cone Street like a farmer plucking the brightest apples.” Dazai scrolled through his computer.

“Yet she does not concentrate on them.” Kunikida had walked around to Dazai’s desk and was reading over his shoulder. “She is believed to be taking - or attempting to take - any child with an ability that she sees fit. Apparently Akutagawa and a team stumbled across her in a deal of their own and took them down. Not for good, it seems.”

“And if she WAS taking children, did the Mafia actually have tabs on her already, or was it really a coincidence?” Atsushi scanned through the report; that part wasn’t so clear.

“Could be either,” Dazai said with a shrug.

“I think we should make a point of protecting these kids.” He knew that everyone would be expecting that from him, but Atsushi wasn’t going to hide how he felt. “A lot of us WERE those kids. Who knows what could happen to them?”

Look at him, look at Kyoka. When kids with abilities weren’t safe...anything could happen. He knew what they needed to do. A group meeting - WITH their allies. He just hoped that the President would listen to him.

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“If you want them, just take them now,” Chuuya said while they waited for the Agency representatives to arrive. He never expected them - especially Dazai - to agree to meet in their building, but he supposed things were changing. Whether that was good or bad, he couldn’t say.

Kouyou watched him from her seat. They were next to each other, Chuuya on her right. On her left, Akutagawa. The young man seemed surprised to be there, but he was an integral part of this - he was the one who faced Ueno, after all. Chuuya rested his chin on his palm and said, “Open up our doors to the kids, take them all in. We get a group so thankful for room and board that they would never betray us, and the kids are safe from maniacs.”

“I would never hear the end of it from Fukuzawa. You know how righteous he is,” Kouyou said. Chuuya had to agree with that - the Agency President was a righteous man, and so attractive. He was always teasing Dazai about his hot boss. The hot boss that should be there any minute. Maybe this meeting wouldn’t be so boring after all.



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Akutagawa, meanwhile, was not looking forward to this at all. He didn't want to deal with any of the Agency, much less the weretiger, and Kouyou had promised that he would be there. Thankfully Akutagawa thought himself capable of going through this meeting without even looking at the weretiger, much less speaking to him. He would just speak when one of his superiors spoke to him - or the President, he supposed. He would be cool, calm, and collected.

When the weretiger walked in, however, hardly trying to hide the way he looked at everything with his bright, inquisitive eyes...Akutagawa could not deny that his heart skipped a beat. He immediately tore his gaze away.

With the weretiger was Dazai, who Akutagawa also couldn't look at, and President Fukuzawa. He watched as the President bowed to Kouyou and all three of them sat across the table, then brought his eyes down to the files on the table. The weretiger sat right across from him. He had expected it, but that did not make Akutagawa like it any more, or any less. His skin could have been on fire and he wouldn't have even noticed. Or maybe it already was and that was why he felt so...much.

"It seems we have quite a decision to make," Kouyou said when everyone was settled. Akutagawa did not have much personal experience with their new boss, but he knew that Nakahara trusted her and the Demon Snow girl could not stand her. That girl didn't make the best decisions, though, so that would never impact his own opinion. Kouyou seemed cool and collected, ready to work. "These children are at risk, and while I know we have differing ideologies, I believe that both of us can agree that we cannot allow this woman to be gathering young ability users; in 10 years they could all be turned against us."

"Differing ideologies?" Dazai said with a laugh. "You people collect orphans and turn them into blades."

"We did once," Nakahara said immediately. "But things aren't like that anymore."

Fukuzawa cleared his throat. "Yes, I do understand that you are revamping the way in which you acquire your young initiates."

Kouyou folded her hands in front of her. "A good many shifts are taking place within the Mafia, but you know we must always have new blood. We can't all operate on...smaller scales."

The weretiger was fidgeting. "And we can't all take young girls and turn them into murderers, either."

Fukuzawa raised a brow, and Kouyou held herself with a calm grace at the slight, but Dazai burst out into laughter. Akutagawa himself was torn between annoyance that the weretiger thought he could just speak to their boss that way, and satisfaction that he was not intimidated

into being quiet. That shouldn't have brought him any satisfaction. He should not have cared at all. Yet, he couldn't help it.

Kouyou herself just looked at the weretiger coolly. "Kyoka and I keep our business to ourselves," she said. "I suggest you do the same, young man."

"If we may return to the business at hand," Fukuzawa said. "I agree that something must be done to keep these children - especially the ones with no guardians - safe. I would suggest a staffed safehouse."

"One of yours?" Nakahara said. Even with their alliance, and his more private alliance with Dazai, he still always sounded combative around the Agency. "Your office workers were disgustingly easy to hunt down, you know. A child could have done it."

"Better than you taking them to house them in these towers like fairy-tale princesses," Dazai said.

"We have the room, the money, and the resources," Akutagawa found himself saying. Dazai's cool gaze was like ice to the heart, but Kouyou's eyes were full of approval.

"And you would gain a small army of loyal children, willing to swear loyalty to you just because you took them off the streets and helped them learn how to use their abilities," Dazai said, leaning back in his chair. "I would rather we take them and keep them in a neutral place. I'm not saying the Special Ability Department and I'm definitely not talking about the Child Welfare Council, but there has to be someplace we can agree on."

Nakahara rolled his eyes, as if he hadn't been suggesting that they do the same thing before the meeting even started. The ladies of the Port Mafia all swooned over those blue eyes, but Akutagawa never saw the appeal. His vision swam with golden and violet hues.

"I don't think you're listening. The Mafia won't take these kids and induct them right away." Nakahara tented his fingers in front of his lips. "And wouldn't they be safer here than anywhere else? There are more of us, if Ueno comes after them then we stand a better chance of protecting them - which yes, we want to do, so you don't have to keep that dour look on your face, tiger!"

Kouyou arranged her own files. "Akutagawa, you are the only one of us to have faced Ueno and expressed that she is a threat."

"Yes," he said, hoping that his lungs cooperated through this. "We ran into her while performing an operation in Kanagawahoncho. At the time, she and her subordinates had set up a base in a local car dealership. We thought they were low-level criminals who just happened to be in the wrong place. She had a powerful ability, though - illness manipulation. Four of the people on the mission ended up falling ill that day - one with the flu, one with a stomach condition, and two with unending migraines. Ueno surrounds herself with offensive ability users and a great number of firearms, which we thought was just caution at first. Now we know better. She escaped with her life."

“And she is connected with the smugglers that the Agency dealt with in what way?” Fukuzawa asked. Akutagawa appreciated the way that the Agency President looked him in the eye as they spoke.

“We believe that she was using drug smuggling as a cover for her true goal of kidnapping the children.” Akutagawa closed his files, meeting Fukuzawa’s gaze.

Kouyou tilted her head to the side, watching the exchange carefully. “We have specialists trailing her right now, and we believe she may have a base between here and Saitama that she is planning on bringing the children to. Our best course of action is a stakeout within Cone Street, to trail Ueno when she makes a move.”

Akutagawa’s heart could have stopped; the last thing he wanted was to go back there. He would do it without complaints, but he had escaped the terrors of that place a long time ago and was in no hurry to return. He watched as Dazai ran his eyes over all three of them.

With his shoulders squared and chin up, Fukuzawa looked Kouyou dead in the eye. Akutagawa could not deny it - the President had style. “You want us to use these children as bait.”

“They’re not really bait if we know she’s already going after them,” Nakahara pointed out.

“I don’t know about that,” the weretiger said. “What if she knows that we’re there, and just doesn’t make a move until we’re gone? Then the kids would be left without sort of protection at all.”

Not at all the sort of argument Akutagawa had expected from him, honestly. Nakahara chuckled, which always sounded dangerous coming from him. “That’s why we send her a little message - maybe start a little fight among the kids. Wake those abilities up, show her they have stuff she wants.”

“Always a thug, aren’t you?” Dazai said. “It’s no wonder I was always the strategist between us; not everything can be solved with a fight.”

“Well then,” Kouyou said, effectively silencing anything Nakahara had to say. “What do you recommend?”

“A large show of us moving to take the kids. Let people see the Agency out there, black vans at night, stir her up. For two nights, we fake maneuvers, let Ueno think we are taking her precious targets. On the third night, we send out a team to stakeout the area as you so cleverly suggested, darling Kouyou, while others continue the maneuvers. That will give her enough time to realize what we have done, make a plan, and move.” Dazai said all of this with an easy smile on his face.

“A suitable plan,” Fukuzawa said. Akutagawa could see the gears turning, though - three days to figure out what to do with those children.

“I suppose it will do,” Kouyou agreed. “I want two of mine and two of yours on this stakeout, though. Akutagawa has already faced this woman, so he will be one of them, and I will have

no arguments.”

Dazai sighed, which Akutagawa pretended not to notice. “Fine. It’ll be Akutagawa, Chuuya, Atsushi, and myself. With two such powerful teams in an area where we are surrounded by backup, it shouldn’t be a problem at all. That way when she shows up, we can take her down.”

Akutagawa watched in abject horror as the two commanding officers decided to send him back to the slums that had almost killed him, in the presence of a man who had almost killed him more than once and a man who had rebuffed him.

This was going to be one hell of a mission.

# A Night

## Chapter Summary

Alright, this chapter took me much longer than anticipated; I hope you enjoy!

It was interesting for Dazai to note that, on the night of the stakeout, Atsushi and Akutagawa wouldn't even look at each other. He knew that something had happened between them, but the problem was, he didn't know what. Dazai did not like not knowing things.

Once they were settled, Atsushi setting up one of their laptops and Akutagawa seeking out the best vantage point in the rundown building, Dazai leaned close to Chuuya. "So, have you noticed the frosty air in here?"

Chuuya shrugged, hardly moving one shoulder. "I guess. I never spent the time with them that you did. I wouldn't know."

"Usually when these two get together, it's constant bickering. Almost like an old married couple at this point, throwing each other's traumas at each other like light insults, smacking each other about the head, silently bonding over a shared judgmental nature...but look at them now." Dazai folded his long arms, watching the way his protege knelt on the dirty ground, knowing that his failure was stalking about above them. He hadn't necessarily wanted to bring Akutagawa back to Cone Street, knowing how sensitive he still was about everything, but he knew this place better than anyone, even after all of these years. "It's an odd thing."

"Whatever it is better not impact the mission, I don't want to hear it from Kouyou if anything happens to these kids. We get this done tonight, and we get it done quick, despite any problems *these* two might be having. You got that, beanpole?" Chuuya looked Dazai up and down, in a way that made him feel a little hot under the collar even if they were on a mission.

"Put that gaze away. We have work to do." Dazai paused there, hands up in the air. "I'm sorry. I sounded way too much like Kunikida there. I take it back."

"All of it?" Chuuya needed.

"Everything that lead to that moment and those dreadful words coming from my waiting lips." He winked at Chuuya, who just waved him off and stomped out of the room, presumably to find Akutagawa.

Dazai fiddled a bit with their supplies - more things than they would need, hopefully - before wandering over to where Atsushi was. He sat down in the dust with a *fwump!*, not particularly caring one way or another if her got dirty. This was Cone Street; everything was dirt here.

Atsushi said nothing as he tapped away, so neither did Dazai. He took up a pair of binoculars and looked out over the slums, the great scar on Yokohama's face, full of misery and promise. So many people were born here and died here without ever knowing life as it could be. Akutagawa had escaped; many were not so lucky. Chuuya had spent time here as well, running the area with Sheep, and Dazai himself had worked here a couple times.

That didn't make it any less sad to see. Dirty-faced children ran around far too late, women sold themselves on the streets, low-down deals took place in the shadows. This was part of the reason Dazai could not stand to be part of the human race.

He lowered the binoculars and looked over to Atsushi. "So, he said casually, "Have you and our monochrome friend upstairs reached a stalemate?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Dazai," Atsushi said, and it was only a little too quick to be natural. He was learning.

"I just couldn't help but notice," Dazai half-sang, "that you haven't been at each other's throats. You're so different than you once were, not so long ago! My children, growing up before my eyes! It brings a tear..."

"We're not children!" Atsushi watched Dazai without turning all of the way. "We can't all keep squabbling with our work partners into our 20s, you know."

Dazai clapped a hand to his chest. "So forceful! So manly! Have you been taking lessons from Kunikida in secret, little tiger?"

"What are you even talking about?" Atsushi shook his head, but Dazai saw the red of his cheeks. He stood up and brushed off his pants. "Nothing is different, Dazai. You're just making something out of nothing. I'm going to make sure the motion sensors work."

"Be caaaareful! Would hate for Akutagawa to have to swoop down and save you!"

That glare before Atsushi shut the door was acidic. Very interesting indeed.

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Atsushi was honestly thrilled when it was finally time to make a move. After a night of waiting, avoiding Akutagawa without making it obvious enough for Dazai to notice, and listening to Nakahara and Dazai bicker in that disgustingly flirty way, he was eager and ready to go. The night was mostly waiting for Ueno to make the move that Dazai was sure she was going to make - and Atsushi had to admit it, Dazai's instincts were usually correct.

Still, it was a mostly quiet night, and Atsushi spent most of it at the laptop, watching for any sign of Ueno's group approaching. It wasn't him who noticed first however, but Nakahara.

"Feel that?" he said, even though Atsushi was sure he knew that none of them did. "A truck coming."

And only after he said that did Atsushi's computer light up, a *blip-blip-blip* sounding in his ear. He lowered one of the ear buds. "It's coming from the north."

"She trying to throw us off?" Nakahara ventured; they had been expecting the west.

Dazai stood, stretching his arms over his head. "Then let's go do this before she can pull anything else."

That was all Atsushi needed to make a move. He would not transform fully this time; the last thing he needed was to lose control again - especially not in front of Akutagawa.

Thankfully, it was Nakahara who accompanied him as the first wave. They didn't know each other well, but Atsushi knew that Nakahara's ability was nothing to scoff at, and neither was his temper. They would be the offense, with Akutagawa waiting in the shadows and Dazai being Dazai. The main goal was to help the kids, not scare any of them away, and hopefully gather them to bring them to safety.

What that safety was yet, no one could agree, but anything was better than here, sitting ducks for an unknown predator to snatch. The Mafia, at least, was a known threat, and that was always easier to deal with than a mystery.

A gloved hand on his chest stopped Atsushi once they had moved a block north. "Remember, tiger - she can make people sick and we're not sure if she even has to touch you. I'll concentrate on Ueno until we can get Dazai on her. You either clear a way to either get the kids out, or get Akutagawa to the kids so he can shield them."

"Alright," Atsushi agreed. He wasn't sure that he wanted to trust Akutagawa with the kids, but with Rashoumon he had the best defense. "Do you want to go first, or...?"

Nakahara grinned in the dark. It was almost feral. "Good plan. Stay hidden until you see an opening."

The truck was armoured, and from the spot he found to watch, he saw nearly 30 suited goons, most of them armed. He had long ago learned to look past them, to the people who had no visible weapons, who were not wearing suits. One woman in blue with a dust mask over her face, who he assumed was Ueno, and five other who stood out. Six ability users, possibly more.

Two were taken out in a heartbeat when a car door, emanating a red aura, sliced through the crowd. Atsushi had to admit it - watching Nakahara work was amazing. He was a little far to hear, and found himself shifting closer to his tiger, until he felt the beginning of the transformation - just a little, not enough to lose control - and his hearing sharpened

Nakahara had a *vulgar* mouth.

There was very little talking done before the ground rumbled. Atsushi watched as Nakahara started to tear through people, paying no mind to any attacks - ability, physical, or bullet - that came his way, and Atsushi's eyes were beyond that truck. That was where they knew a good number of the orphans were hiding out, and it was a decent place - in the center of

things, with tinted windows and, according to research, a basement. The building looked like it could have been a store at one time, but that didn't really matter for his purposes. What mattered to Atsushi was helping those kids.

So when Nakahara lifted the truck up, Atsushi knew that it was time to act. He felt the familiar ache in his bones as his legs and arms transformed, but Atsushi was not going to let himself go completely. He swiped people out of the way as he ran, and assumed the flapping sound behind him was Akutagawa. The children were his main goal, and Atsushi did not mind having to injure people to get there. His claws caught on bodies and a few bullets tried to tear through him, but Atsushi knew how to handle pain by then, how to absorb it, move past it, and even let it fuel him.

When he saw those kids, though, scared and holding onto each other, he needed no more fuel. They were gathered too close to the window for Atsushi to jump through, and he was left to make a quick choice - either veer off to the side and risk losing speed, or climb onto the top of an abandoned truck and enter through the roof. Atsushi didn't have much time to think, so he didn't. He launched himself up to the top of the truck, then onto the roof. It wasn't sturdy enough to support his weight, which he was counting on, and he made sure to brace himself for the impact. Screams pierced the air as he crashed in through the roof, both from the children and the remaining enemies.

Atsushi pushed himself up from the rubble. The children had all pushed back, huddled together. The oldest was already a teenager, but the youngest looked only to be five or six, and that broke his heart. Some were watching in fear, and others in awe. He didn't want to risk transforming back, and just hoped that these children would not be too scared to come with him. Atsushi held his hands, still heavy paws, up in the air. "I-I'm here to help," he said as the dust settled around him. They were barely lit from the outside, and a couple flashlights clutched by the kids. "My name is Atsushi, and see, I'm just like all of you. I want to help you."

There was a loud explosion outside, and Atsushi heard Nakahara's rock star battle cry. "The woman with the truck wants to take you away, and I don't know where. But I'm with the Armed Detective Agency, and we're going to help you."

A red glow lit up the window behind him. At the sound of the window cracking, Atsushi turned and backed up in front of the kids, claws protruding. The glass fell to reveal just Akutagawa, Rashoumon managing to make everything darker and lighter both.

"Why are you wasting so much time?" he growled. Atsushi noted the way his eyes shot beyond him, looking over the kids. "Are these the brats?"

"These are the *kids*, Akutagawa," Atsushi said with a sigh. "Let's just get them and -"

"Wait," came a voice from behind him. Atsushi turned to see the oldest girl, her skin now gray and rocky. An interesting ability. "We NEVER said we were going with you. You said the woman out there wants to take us away, but now you want us to just go with you? We're all supposed to just trust you?"



“Trust doesn’t matter one way or another, girl. If you have any sense of self-preservation you will follow us and do it quickly; I don’t have any time for stragglers.” Akutagawa’s voice was sharp as ever; even with rough coughs as punctuation, he was intimidating.

“This is our home!” spoke up another child. “We’re not just going to leave.”

Before Akutagawa could say anything brash, Atsushi stepped forward. “I know you don’t know us, that we’re just strangers, but we are just like you - two people with abilities we at one point didn’t understand, scared and alone. I can’t promise you that this lady won’t hurt you, or try to use you for her own gain. But I can promise that if you come with us, you will at least live to see the sun rise one more time.”

Akutagawa scoffed, but another explosion shook the ground before he could say anything. It seemed instinctive, the way that Rashoumon built up around him, shielding him from any flying debris. What was Nakahara doing out there? Before his eyes, the black void of fabric became half of a dome. “If any of you are smart enough to want to survive, you will come with me now.”

How could Akutagawa talk to these kids that way, when he had come from something so similar? Atsushi didn’t know much about Akutagawa’s childhood, but he knew enough. Even if he didn’t, something about abilities seemed to eat away at a person’s childhood. “I promise,” Atsushi said again. “Nothing will harm you if you come with us, and you will not be forced to stay.”

He could sense Akutagawa’s impatience as the older kids talk among themselves, but slowly they nodded, and moved as a group past Atsushi, to where Akutagawa’s shield was still up. Atsushi stayed where he was, motioning them forward. Some of the kids stared up at him, and he offered smiles to all of them, while also trying to keep an eye on the battle outside. Had Dazai immobilized any of them yet? There was still gunfire, but he couldn’t tell anything else. With all of the kids now huddled under Rashoumon, Atsushi made to follow.

Until a child’s scream tore through the air. Fear and anger ripped at his heart; had something gotten through Rashoumon? If anyone hurt these kids, Atsushi was not going to be able to keep himself calm.

“M-my bear!” cried one of the young ones.

Atsushi looked around behind him, and finally spotted a stuffed bear all the way in the back of the room. “Akutagawa, take the kids, I’ll get it!”

He heard Akutagawa shouting at him to not waste his time, but Atsushi didn’t care. These kids had so little; he wouldn’t deprive any of them even a modicum of comfort. He dashed across the room and snatched up the bear. Other things caught his eye, however, small trinkets, toys, blankets, things that were important to children. Atsushi snagged a blanket and folded it into a bag, then started stuffing things inside of it. He heard the battle continuing, but the sounds of the children faded and he could only hope that it was Rashoumon closing in around them.

Atsushi was scouring the room, making sure he left nothing behind. A rumble under his feet went unnoticed. There were less gunshots now, and he could hear Nakahara shouting, then a lot of coughing. Akutagawa, or was that Ueno and her ability?

He paused to tie the blanket securely, and throw the whole bundle of his shoulder. Just as Atsushi turned to leave, something dropped into the room. It was round and heavy, and Atsushi realized the moment that it hit the ground it was a blinking, waiting bomb. There was no way out behind him, and the 10 seconds promised by the bomb's face was not long enough for him to get out of range.

He could risk it. Run around the bomb, get ready to ride the propulsion. His regeneration would handle it. Atsushi had no time to overthink it; he had to move. He ran, the makeshift bag flung over his shoulder, just wanting the chance to make it before the blast hit.

What he was not expecting was a strong sheet of black wrapping around his waist. Atsushi knew Rashoumon well enough to know the touch immediately; all he had to do was hold on as he was torn through the air towards Akutagawa. When his feet struck ground, he stumbled towards Akutagawa, colliding with his chest. There was no time to waste; Akutagawa yanked him under the dome created by Rashoumon, as the bomb decimated the building behind him. The children made a fuss, but they were safe.

"You absolute idiot, why would you put yourself in such danger for sentimental garbage?" he hissed, grabbing Atsushi's shoulders. He felt the intense scrutiny of Akutagawa's gaze as those gray eyes scanned over him. It took Atsushi a moment to realize that Akutagawa was checking him over for injuries, and that made his face heat up. "Don't you realize -"

"A-all I realize is that we have to get these kids to the extraction point!" Atsushi whipped away from that look, pulled away from those hands that were warmer than ever. "Let's go!"

He moved over to the kids, calming them as much as he could while they walked in their Rashoumon dome. But he was unbearingly, overwhelmingly aware of Akutagawa's presence.

By the time they got to the extraction point and Kyoka opened the truck doors to help the kids climb in, all sounds of battle had died down. Had they taken Ueno, or would they have to chase her down again? Atsushi tried to think about that, and the kids, instead of the wall of black around them and the man making sure that these children he claimed not to care about didn't get injured.

"Get in the back with them," Kyoka said, holding her hand out to Atsushi. "I'll be up in the cab, but just in case."

"Good idea," he said, letting her help him up.

Atsushi handed the bag to the oldest teen, then turned to see Akutagawa climbing into the truck of his own accord. He slammed the door shut and locked it before sinking to sit down. Kyokya slipped through the small window between the back and the cab, and the whole vehicle started to rumble.

This would be a trying time, but right now all that mattered was these kids, keeping them calm and letting them know that they were absolutely safe. Atsushi walked through the kids, checking on them, talking to them, just trying to keep the peace. He explained to those who would listen that they were just going to be taken to a safe place, have something to eat, and sleep before anything else. Atsushi did not know what the Port Mafia had planned, and he did not care. He promised each scared child and belligerent teen that they were not being brought somewhere permanently. They would keep their freedom and he would make sure of that.

While he was doing that, he was very aware of Akutagawa's cough. Atsushi didn't even want to glance at him, not wanting to risk starting a fight in front of the children; they were scared enough.

The cough seemed to be unending, however, and Atsushi was not able to be cold-hearted, no matter how little he wanted to approach the other man. When the kids settled down, Atsushi turned to look at him. He was sitting in a posture that wanted to be calm, but his shoulders were all but trembling with the force of the coughing. Atsushi moved towards him.

"Akutagawa, are you -"

Akutagawa held the hand that wasn't covering his mouth out. Atsushi noted blood on his sleeve. Had that come from the battle they flung through, or his throat? His lungs? Atsushi ignored the silent command and approached him anyways. "Did you push yourself too much?"

"The air here does that to some people," one of the teens nearby offered.

Akutagawa couldn't even answer, with the way he was coughing. Atsushi knelt between him and kids. "Do we need to stop the truck?"

"O-of course not," Akutagawa managed to spit out, and Atsushi saw blood on his lips, between his teeth. There had been a lot of things in his life Atsushi wished to unsee, but would never be able to banish. This sight was very high on his list. "Just g-give me room to breath..."

Atsushi would have pulled away, had he not felt a tug. He looked down to see Akutagawa gripping the end of Atsushi's belt, knuckles whiter than ever. All Atsushi had to do was move back and Akutagawa would let go; somehow he knew that with great certainty. He didn't need to be right here, nearly on top of him, close enough feel his warmth.

Yet he set his hand on top of Akutagawa's, letting it transform back to human. Those eyes flashed danger, but neither of them moved. Atsushi just settled and kept his hand on top of Akutagawa's until the coughing subsided.

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This was insufferable. Akutagawa moved away from the weretiger the moment he could breath, hating the honest concern in those eyes, and the way his body tingled under a caring

gaze. He wiped his hand on his jacket and used his sleeve to wipe his mouth.

The weretiger tried to have conversations, asking if he thought Dazai and Nakahara were done, if he thought they had Ueno or her subordinates. Akutagawa didn't even answer. If there was anyone he wanted to think of even less than the weretiger right now, it was Dazai. He just stayed silent. The kids kept glancing at them, and Akutagawa just wanted to be out from under their gaze, these living ghosts of the children he had grown up with, these ability-users who could be him in five, ten years. It all made him feel sick.

He never should have returned to Cone Street.

When they at last arrived at the safehouse - Mafia owned, but under the protection of the Agency for now, so no one could whine - Akutagawa stood guard while the children were moved in. He saw Nakahara and Dazai arrive, which meant to him that either Ueno was dead, or had escaped. Akutagawa caught sight of Gin, as well, which meant that she wanted him to see her - one of their codes. She was letting him know she was there, and that she was checking on him. At least she hadn't been dragged back to that hell. He flipped up his collar, signalling that things were fine, and turned back to look at the truck.

He took half a step back when he came face to face with the weretiger.

"Akutagawa, can we take a minute to...I don't know, talk about what -"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Akutagawa said, brushing him off. "The mission is over, we don't have to talk about anything."

"I think we should."

There was so much honesty in that face. Akutagawa squared his shoulders. His skin was on fire where the weretiger had almost held his hand earlier. "Since when have I ever cared what you thought?"

"Fine! You know what? That's fine!" The weretiger raised his hands, a fighter displaying defeat. "I don't know why I even tried! I just think that if you're going to kiss a guy, you should at least hear what he has to say after!"

Jaws snapped at his spine. Akutagawa's brow twitched. "Don't you even *dare* talk about it! As far as I am concerned, that night never happened, do you hear me? That never happened!"

The way he hissed itched at his throat, and he dissolved into a cough. The weretiger's anger seemed to dissipate, just as quickly as it had come. "Aku-"

"Don't. Just don't. You really are useless as always."

He pushed by the weretiger, aiming to go find someone from the Port Mafia and put an end to this night. Akutagawa did not turn back to look at the weretiger, to see if those words burned him as much as they burned Akutagawa. The sooty taste of pain and regret lingered on his lips, embers smoldering in his lungs as they scorched him from the inside out.

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Birds chirped, shouting that the day had begun, the sun was out, and it was time to get up. Water dripped into a puddle under a gutter. A plastic bag rustled by, colliding with empty beer cans. The dumpster nearby smelled atrocious.

Atsushi woke up with blood on his hands two mornings after rescuing the kids, and he was terrified. He was even more terrified to realized he had woken at the end of a dirty alley, clothes shredded, legs still muscular and clawed, with a coppery taste in his mouth. There had been no mission the previous night, and there were no signs of another person in the alley. Atsushi was woozy, aching, and more than anything, horrified at the lack of memories from the previous night. Paired with the tang in his mouth and the mess under his nails, it all led to one haunting question.

If he hadn't been working last night, whose blood was he covered in?

# A Conversation

## Chapter Summary

Sorry this took so long, I was sick and life got away with me. But here I am with the next chapter! Thanks for reading!

Akutagawa didn't usually drink just for the sake of drinking. Yet here he was, sitting uncomfortably on a couch in Nakahara's office while the man poured them drinks from the bar. The bar that he had in his office. The fully stocked bar. In his office. He didn't have the energy to think about that. Akutagawa hardly had the energy to keep himself upright, which was how he had ended up in Nakahara's office to begin with.

Apparently he had nearly passed out in the elevator.

"You're working too hard, kid," Nakahara said, pressing a glass of wine into his hand. It was huge, but wasn't as full as Nakahara's. Ugh. "You were out on that mission for two straight days with no contact at all. Higuchi almost shot the building down when you didn't come back right away."

Akutagawa watched Nakahara slump in the chair opposite him, slouched low, angular legs spread. The wine danced precariously close to the edge of the glass, yet did not spill. "She worries too much. It was a simple mission."

"Then why were you gone so long? Is it because you weren't eating? Is it because those bags under your eyes tell me you haven't slept in a week? Is it because you don't give yourself a second to breath?"

The quick questions felt like gunfire. "It wasn't because I couldn't ha-"

One raised finger from the executive silenced him. Nakahara kept said digit extended while he took an appreciative sip of wine. "I never said that you couldn't handle it. You're wearing yourself out, but more than usual. I want to know why. Now it can happen now by choice, or it can happen by the happy persuasion of this '91 Leflaive doing the talking for you. And this bottle was 300,000 yen, so it WILL make you talk."

Akutagawa couldn't believe people spent THAT much on grape juice. Drinking was not his preferred past time, but in this line of business one learned. "There's nothing to talk about."

"I had plenty to not talk about once," Nakahara said, waving his empty hand about. "And I was the unhappiest man you've ever seen. Listen. Right now we're not mafia members, alright? No executive and black dog. I don't care about your missions or your history with this place. I don't wanna hear a word out of Akutagawa's mouth."

“I want to talk to Ryuunosuke.”

His mouth nearly dropped open. Not only had it been ages since he heard his first name, but from Nakahara? “Wh...what?”

“You heard me. You wormed your black little way into my heart somehow, kid, and this is the repercussion of it. Tell me everything or I swear I will hug it out of you.” Nakahara flexed his hand. “Until your spine snaps in half.”

Akutagawa took a deep breath and drain half of his wine in one go. This ‘91 Le-whatever better really work.

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“And he’s an *idiot*,” Akutagawa was half-slurring 45 minutes later, legs a tangle with Nakahara’s. They were both sitting on the couch now, red faced. Akutagawa was more than a little buzzed and glad for it, because the words coming out of his mouth had been embarrassing. “And if an *idiot* like the *weretiger* thinks he can reject me, what does that even mean?”

Was he making any sense?

“He is an idiot! Listen, kid. Listen to me. Are you listening to me? Listen.” Nakahara sat up straight and reached out a clumsy hand until he grabbed the frilly bit around Akutagawa’s collar. He let himself be dragged up until Nakahara was right in his face. Their noses were almost touching. This, he understood; Nakahara forgot about personal space when he was drunk. “You kissed him. Right?”

“Yes.” Akutagawa’s breath was hushed and felt thick, like fog.

“And he pushed you off. But when he wanted to talk about it, you said no.” Nakahara’s eyes were wide but serious. And so pretty when they were shining with wine that way. Did the weretiger look that way drunk? Those eyes couldn’t get any prettier.

Dammit, no. Concentrate. Come on. “Yes...I said no, because he clearly has no interest so why do I need to hear it?”

Without breaking the intense gaze they held, Nakahara raised a bottle to his lips and finished it off. “He might be an idiot but you’re even more of an idiot, you idiot.”

Nakahara released Akutagawa and flopped back against the arm of the couch. “You know when the Mackerel and I started telling people we were dating, I expected to get a lot of shit from it. Not even just from people around here! I got these two friends - giants, really - from Europe, and they almost flew in to beat some sense into me. But I told’em ‘Vic, Oscar, don’t

think about it! He's different from the asshole I used to bitch about!' They didn't want to listen, though, and just...wait no, that's not really important! What was I saying?

"Yeah, anyways, yeah...I knew people were gonna give us shit, because we were always fighting. We *were* the devastating rivals, after all! But you wanna know a secret?"

All Akutagawa could do was nod.

"We never REALLY hated each other. Dazai? Didn't have it in him back then to feel anything at all, even hate. And I loved that moron from the start. I thought we had something under the bickering. I didn't know how smashed up he was on the inside, he didn't know just how much I hated *my* self, if was a big old bomb of fuck just waiting to explode, you know that? Can't believe it took as long as it did."

This was a lot for Akutagawa to take in, but even through a wine-soaked haze he saw the similarities, he supposed. Nakahara seemed to be off in his own world anyways, and continued. "You know, he left right at the shittiest possible time, too! I was just about to go get the girls lopped off," he said, slapping his chest, "and that dick broke my heart! I hated him so much and spent my time just fighting anyone who would fight me and serial dating women all because Dazai Osamu up and abandoned me! Thought he was gonna BE there, you know! But let me tell ya what - you can't just expect people to do shit without TELLING them you expect it! He didn't abandon me because he didn't know, he had no clue what I wanted from him! You gotta talk to people, dragon roll, especially if you love them."

"Love!? I didn't say anything about love!" Akutagawa almost wished Nakahara would go back to talking about Dazai or the surgery only a few people knew about. Both of those were awkward to hear about but much less awkward than the Weretiger. And especially not THAT word.

Nakahara rolled his eyes. "Well whatever. Dazai didn't know what I was thinking, because I didn't tell him, then got mad at him for not knowing things! It only got better when I actually started *talking* to the guy and climbing that last obstacle."

"And...that obstacle is?" Akutagawa always found himself urging Nakahara to complete his thoughts when he was drunk.

A grin split Nakahara's face. "Sharing *feelings*."

"Never," Akutagawa said. "I don't -"

"I don't caaaaare what you don't," Nakahara interrupted. "I know it's not your strong point, but if you like this kid - really like him and want to make it into something real - you have to talk to him."

Akutagawa dropped his head back against the plush arm of the couch. "Talk to him. I guess. If his stupid voice doesn't annoy me to the point of putting my hands around that pretty neck and squeezing until his eyes pop out."

He closed his eyes. Nakahara chuckled. "Are they pretty, too?"



“What?” Akutagawa had already forgotten what he was saying.

“The tiger’s eyes. Are they as pretty as his neck?”

“Prettier.” He felt movement at the other end of the couch, and Nakahara said something else, but by then Akutagawa was asleep.

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Atsushi had done a little digging of his own, and found out that the blood was from a group of dealers that..probably could have been handled another way. But they had been hurting people, and now they weren’t, and according to the news were not dead. So he would try not to feel guilty. Was he concerned about it happening again? Of course. If Atsushi hurt an innocent person on one of these rampages, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Yet he was reluctant to tell anyone about what had happened. Atsushi was so tired of relying on everyone at the Agency for help. He needed to handle this on his own. All he had to do was figure out the catalyst for the transformation and maybe it would stop. He went through his day with as much normalcy as he could, but he knew that both Ranpo and Dazai had an eye on him. At least that sort of thing didn’t make him feel obvious - those two could always tell when something was off.

He did notice the way Kyoka was watching him over dinner, though. “Something’s wrong with you,” she said in her soft-spoken yet blunt way. “You can’t hide it from me.”

“I’m just tired, Kyoka.” This was the perfect time to tell someone - especially the person he trusted above all others. But Atsushi’s mouth wouldn’t form the words, his heart wouldn’t let him speak. He smiled for her, hoping to smooth things over.

She just looked at him with her usual gaze. Most people would say she looked disinterested, but that was just Kyoka’s normal expression. She was smiling more than ever now, though, and that was good for Atsushi to see. It had been a nearly instant connection with Kyoka, and Atsushi adored her. He just worried that she knew him TOO well. Luckily she sighed and changed the subject.

Atsushi knew that she would be watching him, however. They ate dinner and played games on their cheap laptop before Atsushi declared it an early night. He was still exhausted, and fell asleep nearly the moment his head hit the pillow, light still streaming past the closet door.

He was awakened hours later by the door being thrown open. Kyoka knelt by his head, Kunikida standing behind her. “What...?”

“The kids are under attack,” Kyoka said. She moved out of the way, letting Atsushi scramble out of the closet.

“We just received notice,” Kunikida said. The only sign that he had been sleeping was his slightly rumpled hair; otherwise he was dressed and ready to go as always. “Dazai and Tanizaki have already left; get dressed.”

It took Atsushi no time at all to yank his clothes on. He had promised those kids that they would be safe, and he wouldn’t break his promise.

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By the time they got there, the Port Mafia had arrived as well, which Atsushi was torn about. He did not want to see Akutagawa, yet he was pleased that the mafia was actually doing something about this threat. If he was lucky, Akutagawa wouldn’t even be here. He had made his stance on these kids very clear.

The battle was already raging when Atsushi got an understanding of the situation. Half of the building was destroyed, the kids running everywhere, a couple of the older ones already fighting. He saw a flash of red and black that made him swear under his breath. This wasn’t the time nor the place. So Atsushi let himself fall into the battle.

Kyoka ran beside him, keeping up even when his legs transformed. He was thankful for her presence to keep him grounded. Mostly he just wanted to get the kids out of there; Atsushi wasn’t interested in fighting. Just helping.

So when he saw a kid, barely 10, be grabbed by the neck, it lit a fire in him. Atsushi split from Kyoka and powered toward the sight. The kid’s face was turning blue as he was dragged away -

And the next thing Atsushi knew, he was on his back, the sounds of the battle were gone, and his face was absolutely aching. He raised his hand to his face and it came away bloody. There wasn’t even a moment of wondering what had happened. He had lost control again. Nearby, something moved. “Dazai...?”

“You’re not so lucky.”

The rasp in that voice pierced Atsushi’s heart. That wasn’t Dazai at all. He turned his head to see Akutagawa leaning against a wall. He didn’t want to deal with this, but had bigger things to worry about. “How long...? What...what happened?”

“Are you talking about those kids, or about how you completely lost control of yourself?” Akutagawa wasn’t even looking at him. “Your precious orphans have been retrieved and are being moved to somewhere safe. They left about 20 minutes ago.”

Atsushi pushed himself up. His clothes, as always, were destroyed. There was blood all down his front and his face was throbbing. Around him, a clean up crew was working to deal with bodies. “And about how I...lost control?” There was speculation in his voice, as if Atsushi was unaware that he did this. “What happened there?”

With a heavy sigh through his nose, Akutagawa finally looked down at him. “You were rampaging, completely gone. Nothing but the man-eater you have yet to accept that you are.”

“Akutagawa, THIS is why I wouldn’t kiss you back!”

The words fell around them, heavy. They surprised Atsushi, he hadn't even thought them before speaking. Akutagawa opened his mouth, then closed it again. When he finally spoke, it was a haughty whisper. “Is now the time, weretiger?”

“Is it worse than any other time?” Atsushi asked.

No one was close enough to hear them. He was surprised when Akutagawa sat on the ground as well, jacket spilling out around him. Atsushi was even more surprised when Akutagawa looked over at him and said, “I never planned on...kissing you.”

“I’d hope not,” Atsushi muttered.

Akutagawa’s lip curled in a snarl. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What that MEANS is that I don’t know how someone could talk to a person the way YOU talked to me while also planning on kissing that person!” Atsushi tore a piece of his sleeve off to mop at the blood on his face.

He froze when a pale hand knocked his own hand to the side. Akutagawa was holding a white handkerchief and used that to blot at the blood. The touch was...gentle. So much more gentle than Atsushi thought Akutagawa was capable of. And he just let him do it. Akutagawa sighed. “I had to punch you in the nose to get you to stop. Dazai wasn’t nearby...”

There was hesitation in his voice, and Atsushi squashed the words that were climbing his throat. “We were enemies, weretiger,” Akutagawa finally said, still cleaning Atsushi’s face. “Even as allies, we have always been enemies. Do you really think that I would speak to you in such a way if we were...”

His face was red. “Not enemies?”

Atsushi looked away. Akutagawa’s hand was warm on his face. Funny. Atsushi would have expected him to be cold to the touch. “I saw the way you spoke to your blonde coworker. I’ve spent enough time with you to know how you act. Even those innocent kids, you spoke to roughly.”

“As if you have never been spoken to this way before.” Akutagawa switched to the other side of Atsushi’s face, carefully avoiding his nose. Carefully. Atsushi closed his eyes; he couldn’t take that heavy gaze.

“That’s...sort of the point, Akutagawa.” Atsushi didn’t think that he had ever been so close to him without being in pain. “I can’t date someone who hurts me like everyone else has.”

“Date?” Akutagawa pulled away at that. “No one ever said -”

“You kissed me. What else am I supposed to think?” Atsushi opened his eyes.

With a growl, Akutagawa shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket. “Well, you apparently know me SO well. You have always made assumptions about me.”

“Only based off what you’ve shown me!” He sighed and prodded at his nose. It hurt, but it wasn’t broken. “You have only every shown me a vicious thug; what else would I expect? That just because you want to kiss me you would suddenly turn into a warm, loving person? Because I’ve been hurt enough. I know that people don’t change that quickly!”

Akutagawa stood up. “I never would have picked you,” he said quickly, voice rash. “In a million years, I never, ever would have chosen you. I don’t know what I was thinking, acting on ignorant impulses.”

Red radiated around him. Atsushi was too tired for a fight. Yet he picked himself up. “And I never would have picked you, either. I never would have wished for that kiss from you, because now I can’t stop thinking about it!”

Whatever Akutagawa was going to do, that seemed to stop him in his tracks. “You...?”

“Yeah, I can’t stop thinking about it!” Atsushi wasn’t even sure what he was saying, just that it was the truth. “And even though you make me feel like shit, all I want is for you to kiss me again!”

He hadn’t been able to admit it himself. But Atsushi had enjoyed that kiss. His first kiss.

“But we can’t, because I can’t kiss someone who has hurt me so much, said terrible things to me, hurt Kyoka - I can’t! I have seen way too much abuse at-”

“Then let us be be done with it,” Akutagawa said, sounding so formal in his attempt to keep himself from losing his mind. “Let us be done with it, weretiger. I will work with you if ordered, but that is it.

“Otherwise, I will be pleased to never see you again.”

Atsushi let him walk away, heart racing. He was so stupid. Why would he ever tell Akutagawa that he liked the kiss? What was wrong with him? He sighed and looked out over the mess. He would try to clean up; maybe helping someone would make him feel like less of a mess.

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Akutagawa walked away into the dark, emotion broiling inside of him. He was an absolute idiot. How had he survived so long with half a brain? Because that was the only possible excuse for why Akutagawa had even tried to talk things out with the weretiger. He wouldn’t even try to call him by his name, because they were nothing to each other now. Life wasn’t even like it was with they were enemies.

They were nothing now, because once again, Akutagawa as himself was not good enough. Not as he stood. People always wanted him to change to be what they wanted, or to be rid of him, and the weretiger was no different.

The sounds of voices met his ears. “We’ll go to Yamanashi,” said a woman. “And regroup from there. These aren’t the only ability-users around.”

A car door slammed, but not before Akutagawa moved through the shadows and saw Ueno, hair flashing in the wind. They all piled in the car and drove away.

No one saw the death that followed them through the shadows. If Atsushi saw a vicious thug, then let Akutagawa be a vicious thug.

It was the only thing he was good at.

# A Realization

## Chapter Summary

Well it's only been...like 10 months since I updated this. But here it is!

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I understand that you lost control again.”

When Atsushi arrived at work that next morning, he hadn't expected the President to want to meet with him. Despite everything he had done for Atsushi and the others, Fukuzawa was still an intimidating man, and sitting before him, across from a desk piled high with important documents, Atsushi couldn't help but feel like he was getting in trouble for something.

“Yes,” he said, forcing himself to look the President in the eye. “This is the...third time, though. I reported the other two because they happened during missions - the one just recently at the safehouse, and the one during the first run-in with Ueno.”

Fukuzawa's face gave nothing away. “Tell me about the third time.”

“It happened after we got the kids the first time. I woke up in alleyway the next morning, in human form, bloody. I ended up figuring out that the blood was from that group of arms dealers I was looking into, so it...worked out, but what if it hadn't? What if it had been some innocent person?” Atsushi's hands were clasped tight in his lap. “Why is this happening to me?”

“It's troubling. My ability should keep yours in check. Some things can change that. Usually an illness, if it is fatal or chronic, is the most obvious culprit.” The President held Atsushi's gaze with an intensity that was almost oppressive. “However, when one's life is in mental or emotional turmoil, abilities have been known to react in strange ways. I am not here as a therapist, Atsushi, but if something has happened to impact you to such a degree, perhaps sharing it would alleviate the stress and help you regain control of your ability.”

“There's nothing,” Atsushi said, even though he had been able to stop thinking about Akutagawa since their run-in. How in the world could something like that stop him from being able to control his ability? That didn't make sense to him.

The President watched him for a moment, then bowed his head. “Very well, Atsushi. For now, keep an eye on yourself, and if you notice anything out of the ordinary, let me know.”

“Of course.”

Atsushi was pleased to be dismissed; he just wanted to settle down, get to work, and forget what was happening to him.

Unfortunately, he had only been working for about 20 minutes when he noticed Dazai looking over at him. He did not make the mistake of looking directly over; Atsushi had learned long ago that meeting Dazai's eye directly was a dangerous thing. So, covertly, he glanced at Dazai, not even turning his head.

Brown eyes were watching him intently. And he had been caught. Damn.

"Atsushi, come get lunch with me," Dazai said casually.

Kunikida made a sound that was half hum, half scoff. "It's not even 10:30, Dazai, it's hardly time for lunch. Especially since you haven't done a *single* thing other than balance your pencil on the end of your nose all morning."

Dazai leaned back dramatically in his chair. "Kunikida, how callous of you! How cruel! Our Atsushi here has been working so hard to protect those poor, innocent children, and yet you deny him the nourishment he needs! You know, there are new studies that say the human brain isn't fully formed until 25, and he's not even that old yet!"

He had been spinning slowly in his chair as he spoke. Kunikida all but growled. Dazai slowed to a stop. "Think of all the work he'll get done once he's working on a full stomach!"

With a flourish, Dazai stood up. The chair turned once or twice behind him before stilling. "Atsushi, stand up!"

Now, Atsushi didn't really want to stand up, but he also knew better than to deny Dazai. He had hardly lifted himself from the chair when Dazai threw a lanky arm around his shoulder. There was no choice but to be steered out of the office and down the stairs. When it came to Dazai, there was never really a choice at all.

Dazai whistled as he brought Atsushi down to the street. But when he turned to go down the street instead of to a usual lunch spot, Atsushi looked up. That innocent face revealed nothing - but then again, it never did. They were certainly not heading to eat any sort of lunch. "Uhm, Dazai -"

"Ah, ah, ah, my darling apprentice, not so fast!" Dazai still had his arm around Atsushi's shoulders as he turned him towards one of Yokohama's many parks. "Let me take the wheel, so to speak - you and need to have a talk."

That was possibly the last thing that Atsushi wanted to do. Dazai was close to him, and Atsushi admired him very much, but when Dazai had that look on his face, Atsushi became wary.

Still, he let himself be brought to a small park - almost concealed, surrounded by businesses and near a school. The clamor of the city surrounded them as Dazai picked out a bench - the most distant from the roads on either side of them. They sat, and Dazai made rather a show of

untying the laces of one of his shoes. Lanky body doubled over as he tightened the laces. Dazai's clear voice met Atsushi's ears. "Our little tiger cannot keep control, then."

"Dazai, please. I already talked about it with the President." If he had known that THIS was what Dazai wanted to talk about, he would have begged Kunikida to make him stay in the office.

"What sort of mentor would I be if I didn't offer my services?" Still fiddling with his shoe. "Or my worldly advice?"

Out of all of the people in the world to hear about what was going on Atsushi's head, Dazai was so far on the bottom of the list that he could drown in names. Which...he might even like. Sigh. "I know you've seen a lot, Dazai, but I'm not sure what advice you could have? This is a strange situation for me."

"Is it a strange situation for Akutagawa?"

Atsushi's heart froze in his chest. "What are you talking about?"

"I know the both of you very well." At long last, Dazai straightened up and locked gazes with Atsushi. "And I've seen the way the two of you have been interacting and I can't help but wonder exactly what happened between you. Something, surely, has taken place between yourself and our Black Dog. Then, suddenly, your ability starts to act up. It doesn't take a genius to see that these two things are correlated."

It was impossible to keep things from Dazai. Atsushi sighed and looked away from him, choosing instead to run his eyes over the speckled pavement underneath his shoes. "He kissed me."

"He what?"

Atsushi didn't normally get to hear Dazai sound surprised by anything; if this were any other conversation, he might have enjoyed that more. "Akutagawa kissed me. Right before this Ueno business started."

He looked back up at Dazai, whose calculating eyes had gone sharp. "Akutagawa kissed you," he said, as if trying to wrap his mind around the idea. "And you...?"

"Pulled away. Or...didn't kiss back. It seems like a rushed blur now. I thought you had already figured it out, Dazai, don't make me relive it." He remembered the teasing on that night they saved the children.

"Well I had my theories, but that was a little past even the boundless limits of my imagination. Was that all he did?" Dazai was leaning against the back of the bench now, hands in his pockets and eyes on Atsushi.

With a sigh, Atsushi looked up to the sky. "Yeah. That night, anyways. He helped me when we got the kids, and then when I've tried to talk about what happened, he won't have it and we just get into a fight."



“Do you think you’ve tried your best?”

Despite everything Atsushi knew about Dazai, his eyes always seemed so honest. “I don’t know-”

Dazai held up one spindly finger.

“Atsushi. Do you think that you have tried your best?”

“No.”

A kitty-cat smile spread across Dazai’s face. “Ah, ah, ah, my dear tiger. That’s not like you.”

Atsushi knew that he was right. He sighed and looked up at the bright sky. Who ever could have guessed that this was what his life would become? “How can I try my best when I don’t know what I want out of all of this mess?”

“That, I can’t help you with.” Dazai patted him gently on the head. “But you’re a smart lad - you’ll figure something out.”

He supposed. Atsushi had absolutely no faith in himself - he would have to rely on Dazai’s.

---

Atsushi was on Dazai’s mind that night, and the next few after that. For a long time, Dazai had thought himself incapable of forming meaningful relationships anymore. But Atsushi had become important to him. It no longer stung to say that Kunikida was his closest friend.

And the man coming into the bedroom?

“Your lanky ass takes up too much room on the bed! Scoot over!”

Chuuya had always been something different. Dazai set down the notebook he was scribbling in and scooted over just a little, to humor him. “You seem bright and chipper.”

Still dressed in work clothes, Chuuya sat on the bed. “Akutagawa’s missing.”

It wasn’t every day that he brought up Akutagawa. There was bad blood between himself and Chuuya when it came that particular young man, and it usually ended up in a fight that Dazai wasn’t looking to repeat. Since Chuuya brought it up, however, he decided to stick a toe into shark-infested waters - especially since this news was particularly interesting.

Dazai didn’t let on, though. “Stray dogs often disappear from home for days at a time.”

“Not without Gin knowing where they are.”

The weight of that sentence was heavy over the room - Western style, lascivious, Chuuya's. Gin did often know where her brother was, that was true. "And how long has the doghouse been empty?"

"A week. He hasn't been home, or to HQ. Neither Gin nor Higuchi have been able to track him down, and he hasn't even checked in with the Boss." Chuuya lit a cigarette - he must have been really worried. Dazai took it from him; he hated the smoke. Chuuya glared as Dazai put it out in the dregs of his sake bottle but did not light another one. "This had gone past the point of being like him and I'm ready to send some guys after him."

"When was the last time he was seen?"

"The last run in with Ueno. I don't know who the last person to see him was." Chuuya rolled out of bed and wandered over to the liquor cabinet.

"Ah." Dazai watched Chuuya uncork a wine bottle with one thumb and take a drink. "Well, that's no mystery, because I think I do."

---

"He's missing?" Atsushi's voice was the first to sound off. The Agency was having a meeting, and Kunikida stood at the white board to read off a list of developments on Ueno's case and others - including the news that Akutagawa had not been seen for a week. Kyoka gave him a look but it went ignored, as did Dazai's quick flickering gaze.

"It seems so," Kunikida said as he flipped through his notes. How did this get even get in here? He didn't remember writing this down, but it WAS in his handwriting. Hm. "Since the night Ueno attempted to kidnap the children."

Since the night Atsushi and Akutagawa had gotten into that fight. Illness coated his stomach; something about this felt wrong. "He hasn't been to work?"

"No! What does 'missing' mean to you?" Kunikida snapped. "The Port Mafia will be handling that."

Kunikida moved on with the meeting, but Atsushi did not. Kyoka scribbled him a quick note. "*What's wrong?*"

Atsushi just shook his head, because he didn't know. Akutagawa worked harder than even Kunikida, but Atsushi didn't know. Akutagawa never wanted to disappoint his bosses, but Atsushi didn't know. Akutagawa could handle himself.

But Atsushi had a feeling that something *was* terribly, violently wrong.

Yes, Dazai forged Kunikida's handwriting to get the note about Akutagawa being missing in there.

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