

A N I M E

BUNGO

STRAY DOGS

NOVEL VERSION



Original Story by BUNGO STRAY DOGS PARTNERS

Written by MARI KOSAKA

Illustration by oda

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Mari Kosaka

ILLUSTRATION BY
oda



Copyright

Anime Bungo Stray Dogs Novel Version MARI KOSAKA

Translation by Matt Rutsohn

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ANIME BUNGO STRAY DOGS SHOSETSU BAN

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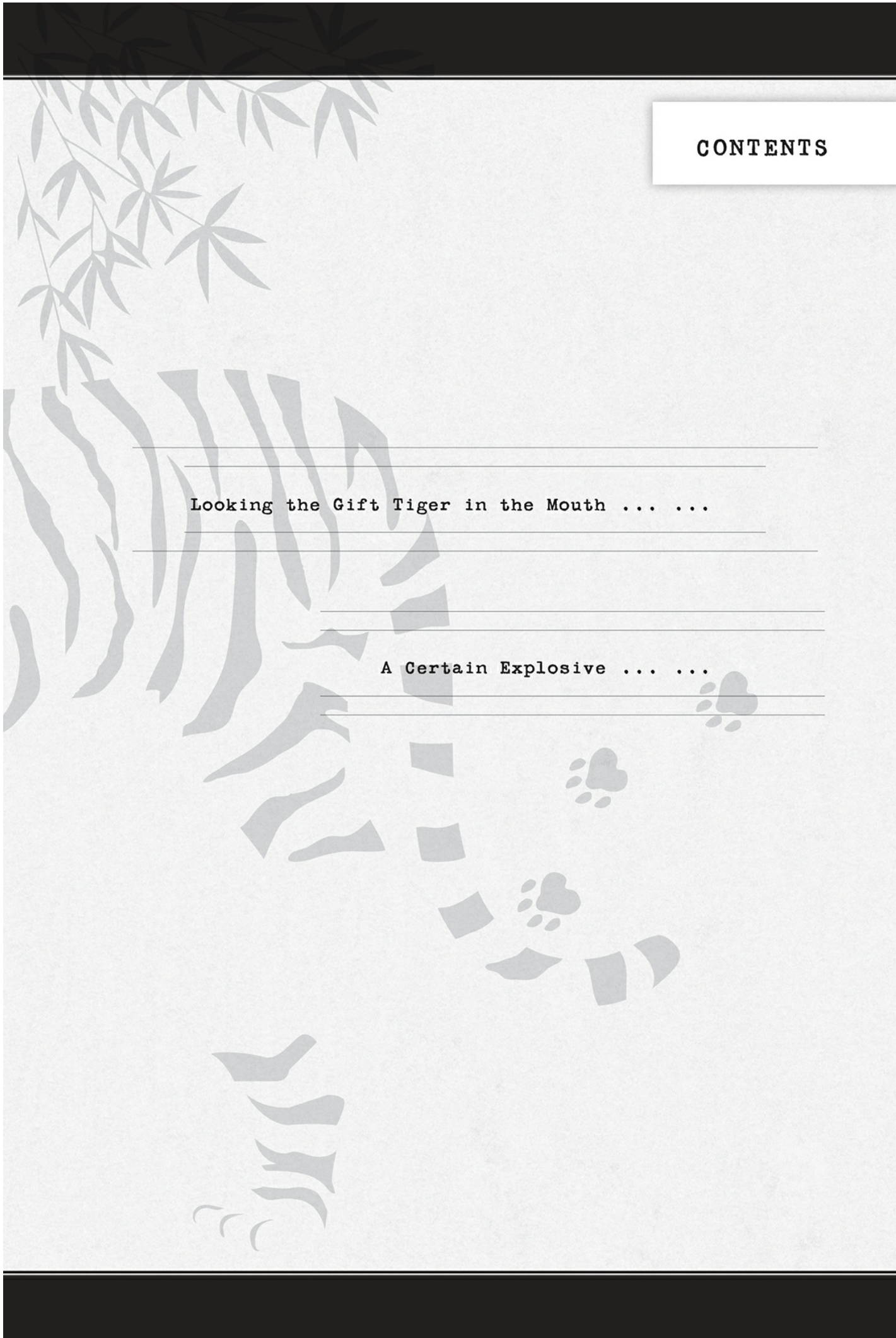
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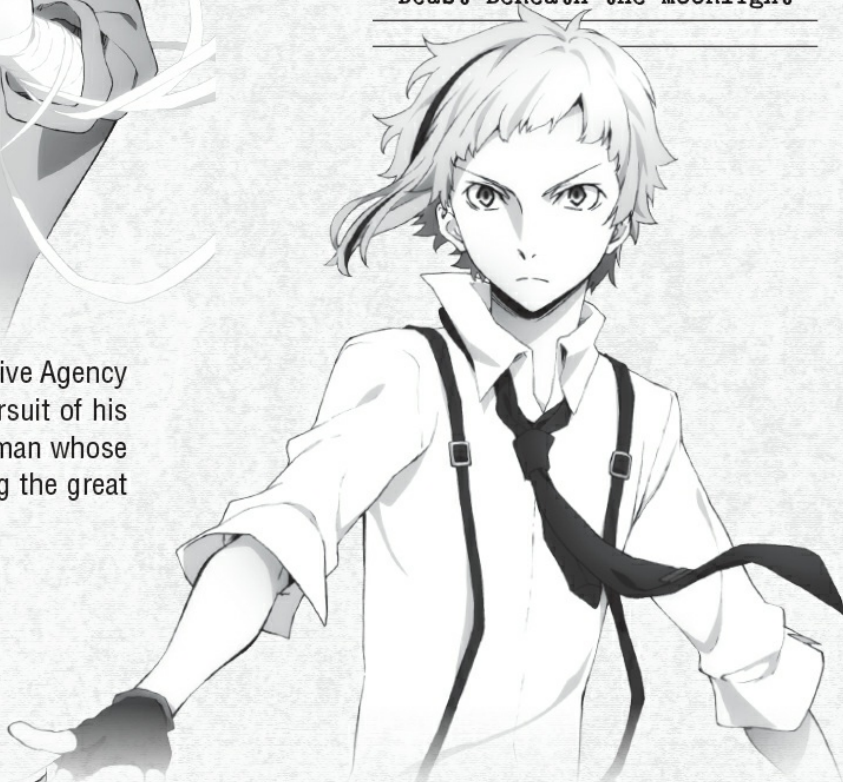
OSAMU DAZAI

Skill: No Longer Human

A member of the Armed Detective Agency and a suicide enthusiast in pursuit of his final resting place. An elusive man whose previous line of work is among the great mysteries of the agency.

ATSUSHI NAKAJIMA

Skill:
Beast Beneath the Moonlight



Capable of transforming into a massive, ferocious tiger. He ends up joining the Armed Detective Agency after being saved by Dazai.



DOPPO KUNIKIDA

Skill: The Matchless Poet

A member of the Armed Detective Agency. Carries a notebook with the word *Ideals* on the cover and uses what's written in it to guide him through life.

**RANPO
EDOGAWA**

Skill:

Super Deduction



A member of the Armed Detective Agency. The world's greatest detective, he has solved countless difficult cases.

**KENJI
MIYAZAWA**

Skill:

**Undefeated by
the Rain**



A member of the Armed Detective Agency. Before joining the agency, he lived in a rural village that didn't even have electricity.

**AKIKO
YOSANO**

Skill:

**Thou Shalt
Not Die**

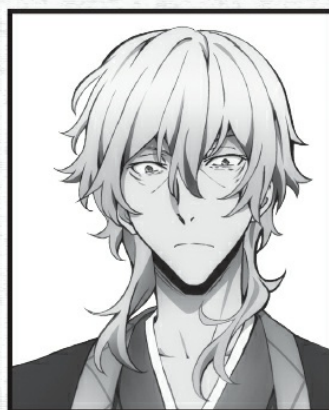


A member of the Armed Detective Agency. Despite being a highly skilled physician, she is feared by her fellow colleagues.

**YUKICHI
FUKUZAWA**

Skill:

All Men Are Equal



The president of the Armed Detective Agency and leader of its band of goons.

**JUNICHIRO
TANIZAKI**

Skill:

Light Snow



A member of the Armed Detective Agency. Often overwhelmed by the extremely aggressive displays of affection from his sister, Naomi.

**NAOMI
TANIZAKI**



A member of the Armed Detective Agency's staff who loves her big brother, Junichiro, much more than is normal.

A bowl of tea over rice.

Pickled plums; dried, shredded seaweed; and leftover chicken from dinner—all submerged in a bowl of hot water with salted kelp sprinkled on top.

“I can still taste that delicious bowl of tea rice I had to sneak into the kitchen to steal...,” Atsushi muttered.

It felt like only yesterday when the aroma of kelp-scented steam reached his nose.

There wasn’t another soul in sight that evening along the riverbank. Both the sky and the gently flowing river were wrapped in a vermilion glow. All he could hear was the faint rattling of a train crossing the nearby bridge.

Atsushi listened to that sound and tottered down the path until his legs suddenly gave out, and then he dropped to his knees, sending his face straight onto the pavement.

Owww...

But he didn’t even have the energy anymore to lift his head back up. Who knew how much time had gone by since he’d begun aimlessly wandering the streets? Not even a morsel of actual food had touched his lips these past few days. He had genuinely reached his breaking point.

“Geh...”

Atsushi groaned lifelessly, unable to move.

“It’s over... I’m gonna die of hunger...”

Due to a few unavoidable circumstances...

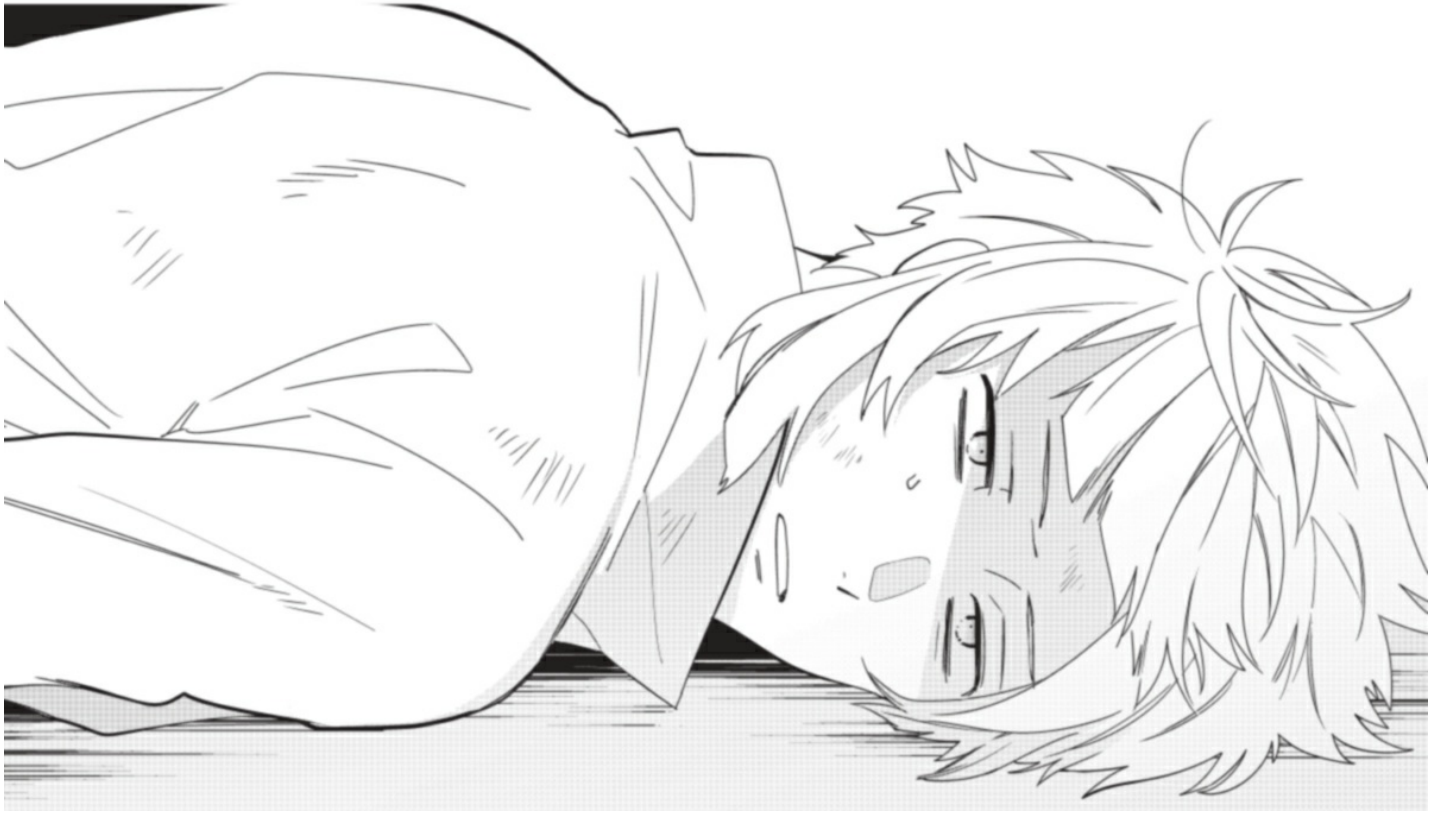
...Atsushi was on the verge of starving to death.



LOOKING THE GIFT TIGER IN THE MOUTH ①



The train passed over the bridge and slowly began to blend in with the skyscrapers on the other side of the river. Atsushi half-consciously listened to the noise in the background.



“Kicked out of the orphanage, no food, no shelter, and not even a single yen to my name, which probably goes without saying...and now I’m lying facedown in the dirt.”

But no one was there to listen to his story, for Atsushi was the only person at the riverbank. Once the train in the background faded into the distance, all that was left were the evening glow and utter silence. Atsushi clenched his teeth and punched the ground.

“Still...!”

His arms shaking, he slowly began pushing himself up with every last bit of energy he had.

“I’m out of options—if I want to live, I’m gonna need to steal!”

He fixed the sky with a glare, his voice hardened with determination.

However...

“Get out!”

He suddenly heard voices in his head, and his expression tensed.

“You are not welcome here!”

They were the voices of adults, looking down at Atsushi and yelling at him.

“Shut up...!” he demanded, but the voices continued to play on repeat in his mind with no end in sight. He staggered to his feet, then firmly stood in place.

“Shut up... Shut up... Shut...uuuup!!”

Atsushi clenched his fists so tightly that they began to hurt. His voice echoed down the river, slowly fading until only silence remained once again. His stomach was empty to the point that he started to feel nauseated.

“...I’m not gonna die. I’m going to live...no matter what it takes!”

He clenched his fist with a grim expression.

“All right...,” he muttered. “I’m gonna rob the next person I see of everything they’ve got!”

He didn’t have a choice. Atsushi lowered his gaze, sharpening his senses as he waited for someone to get close enough. A cold breeze brushed against his skin. The river splashed; maybe a fish had leaped into the air.

...Someone’s coming!

Hearing the faint sound of a vehicle approaching, Atsushi immediately turned around.

Whoa—!

It was a motorcycle.

Vrooom! The large motorcycle roared as it blasted down the street. It passed him in the blink of an eye. Even the echoes were soon nothing but a fading memory.

Atsushi, who had been watching in a daze with his mouth agape, suddenly came to his senses.

“...Ugh! You’ve gotta be kidding me!” He looked down at the ground in frustration. “There’s no way I’d be able to catch up with that on an empty stomach!”

Even a little food in my stomach wouldn’t help me catch up with a motorcycle.

I’m just having a little bad luck. Yeah, that’s all this is. Only an idiot would expect everything to go well on the first try.

“...Next one!”

Atsushi lowered his gaze once more and waited with bated breath for the next target to appear.

He could hear a voice in the distance. It was most likely someone selling grilled sweet potatoes, but it sounded like it was really far away. Plus, what he needed right now wasn't a grilled sweet potato. If only someone would walk by...

That was when he suddenly heard footsteps coming from the pathway that edged the riverbank. Finally.

Now's my chance!!

Firing himself up, Atsushi spun around, but right as he was about to courageously take his first step forward...

“One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!”

...he heard the spirited yelling of the military police in the middle of a training drill.

“Urk...!”

Atsushi froze in place with his fists still clenched, ready to attack.

The military police specialized in fighting the most violent criminals. These trainees were heavily armed, so they could easily stop a bank robbery or a carjacking, at the very least. Perhaps they were training to get themselves used to actual combat.

To make matters worse, it wasn't only one or two people. There were multiple soldiers—dozens, even. The lines of marching military police seemed almost endless.

So then...

No, there's no point...

Atsushi took a few steps back. The crease in his brow deepened.

“...I doubt any of them would be carrying a wallet during training!”

The only things the soldiers were probably carrying were a baton and a gun.

Neither of those would satisfy what Atsushi's stomach was craving right now, and he didn't have the money for a dentist if he ended up sinking his teeth into those inedible items.

"Next person I see, though... I'm gonna do it..."

He once again clenched his fists tightly.

Yes, bad luck. That was what this was. Just a little bad luck. It wasn't like the military police *always* trained around here.

After pulling himself together, Atsushi lay in wait once more for his next target. He strained his ears so that not even the faintest of footsteps would go unnoticed.

Someone was coming.

Atsushi's fingers began to tremble from nerves. Somebody was nearby, no doubt about it.

"You're mine!!"

He swiftly turned around in the direction of the river.

"...Uh..."

And his eyes automatically locked on the first thing he saw.

...A-are those...legs?

But no matter how long he stared, he couldn't deny what he was seeing. It was a pair of legs—spread out wide and bent at the knees—floating in the sparkling river under the evening sun. Atsushi cautiously stepped back, his cheek now twitching.

Blub-blub, blub-blub, blub-blub...!

Muffled sounds were coming from the depths of the river. To make matters worse, the disembodied legs started spinning and slowly floating toward Atsushi.

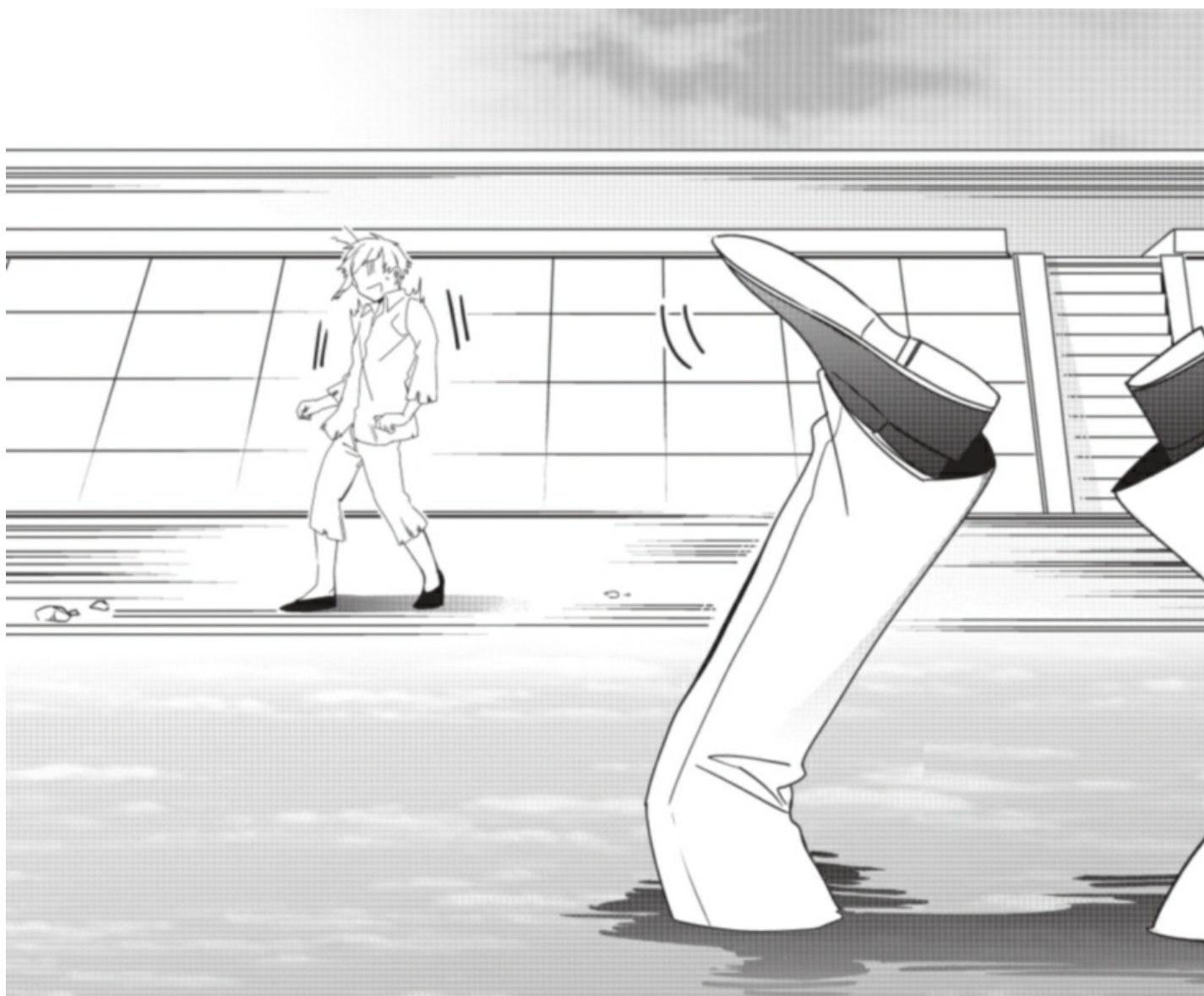
Some nearby crows began pecking at them as if to say, "*Can we eat these?*" before angrily cawing at how awful the legs must have tasted.

Atsushi anxiously followed the disembodied legs with his eyes. Whoever they

belonged to must have been quite a curious individual, seeing as their upper body remained completely submerged while their lower body protruded from the water.

A brand-new way to catch fish...? No, that wasn't it. Perhaps this person was in the middle of a swimming routine? But that didn't appear to be the case, either. Maybe hunger was simply causing Atsushi to see things... That would have been preferable, but the mysterious legs gradually getting closer were most certainly real.

The legs were still twitching, which meant that their owner could very well be alive, albeit barely. Bubbles were making their way to the water's surface as well; that was somewhat of a relief. But...that would mean that this person... was Atsushi's next target.



“Nooope!” He frantically shook his head. “This guy doesn’t count...”

There was something extremely off-putting about robbing this person.

“Please don’t make me do it! I—I don’t wanna do it...!”

He was about to collapse from hunger. He didn’t have the energy to worry about anyone else. *So...what if I just pretend like I didn’t see anything?*

Atsushi closed his eyes and clenched his fists once more. The legs were still making their slow approach downstream. The bubbles surrounding them gradually decreased, and the legs seemed to be sinking as well. At this rate, whoever this was really was going to— “Rahhh!!”

Atsushi shouted as if to rid himself of any doubt and began running toward the river. He dived straight into the water as it glittered in the evening sun. A loud *splash* followed.

Nobody would have blamed him or have even known if he’d pretended not to see those legs. He knew that, and yet—



“Pant... Pant... Pant...”

After dumping the person onto dry land, Atsushi dropped to the ground, gasping for air and struggling to catch his breath. The whole point was to rob someone out of desperation, but he ended up using the last bit of what little energy he had left to save someone. He was going to pass out for certain now.

Atsushi wiped the droplets of water running down his chin with the back of his hand and then glanced at the person lying on the ground at his side. He seemed to be a man in his early twenties, wearing a white open-collared shirt under a sand-colored coat and bandages wrapped around his hands and neck. Atsushi slowly leaned forward to see if he was all right when suddenly the stranger opened his eyes and slowly sat up.

“Whoa...!!” Atsushi yelped, his face tensing. He got ready to flee.

This man—who was going to give Atsushi a heart attack for more than one reason—simply stared idly into space as if he didn’t even understand the

situation that he was in. The wet hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks was unruly, but his face was rather handsome.

“You were underwater for a while there... Are you okay?” Atsushi timidly asked.

“I’m alive...,” the nameless man muttered in a daze. “Tch.” He suddenly scowled.

Atsushi jerked back and stared at the man in disbelief.

What the...?! Did he just click his tongue?!

“Once again, I am denied the sweet release of death. Was it you? Did you do this to me?”

The man sluggishly got to his feet, drenching the ground with the water dripping from his coat and hair.

“I was just trying to help you...” Atsushi pouted when it suddenly hit him midsentence. “Wait, what?! ‘Sweet release’?!” he shouted in astonishment.

The stranger swiftly turned around. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

Of course, Atsushi knew exactly what the man had meant.

“I don’t want to be alive anymore,” the man said outright, stuffing his hands in his coat pockets.

“Y-you what?!”

Atsushi’s voice cracked. He understood that normal people wouldn’t be floating in a river with their heads underwater and legs in the air, but...

“I was trying to kill myself!” the man boldly announced. “But you ruined everything...” He frowned.

“Huh...?” Atsushi said in bewilderment, his eyebrow twitching.

Why’s he mad at me?

Why am I getting scolded for saving someone’s life...?

“Still,” the man began, “it is my belief that suicide should be clean, pure—not a bother or burden to anyone. The mistake I made here was imposing on you.

There must be some way I can make it up to you...”

He sank deep into thought.

Atsushi staggered to his feet.

I saved him. I did my part. Now I need to find something to eat.

But his legs were wobbling. He no longer had the strength to stay upright.

That was when his stomach let out a deafening *GROOOOOOWL!!*

I-it's over...for me...

“Hmm?” The man curiously looked over at Atsushi, who was struggling to stand. “Are you hungry, kid?”

“I actually...haven't eaten...in days...,” Atsushi confessed in almost a whisper while he clutched his stomach.

GROOOOOOOOWL!!!

An even louder roar caused Atsushi to almost fall over backward. *Was that my stomach?* he wondered, but it didn't sound like it was coming from him. Since there were only two people here, that meant just one thing: It was this stranger's stomach that was rumbling.

“What a coincidence,” the man said. “I'm hungry, too.”

But he expressed no signs of embarrassment. If anything, he seemed proud.

“Then...!”

Atsushi's face lit up. If they were both hungry, then the solution was obvious. They needed to go somewhere with amazing food. That was the only reasonable thing to do.

“I appear to have lost my wallet in the river, though.”

The man turned his coat pockets inside out, revealing only some water and a small frog that must have hopped inside when he was floating down the river.

“You've gotta be kidding me...!”

Atsushi's head sank in disappointment. Now there were two hungry people without a single yen between them.

Why isn't anything going my way today?

But right when he lifelessly let out a sigh...

“There you are, you stupid oaf!”

An angry voice suddenly echoed up from the riverbank, causing Atsushi and the nameless man to shift their gazes in that direction.

Standing on the other side of the river was an aggravated-looking man with his arms crossed. He wore a serious expression behind his glasses and a clean, well-ironed vest over a black collared shirt paired with a red ribbon tie. His long hair was in a low ponytail.

Atsushi didn't know this man...which could only mean one thing: He must be an acquaintance of the eccentric stranger.

“Oh, Kunikida! About time you got here!”

The stranger waved and offered a friendly smile.

“‘About time’?! It's about time *you* stopped wasting *my* time, you suicidal maniac!” the man called Kunikida yelled back with a furious crease in his brow. Despite how obviously upset he was, the target of his anger didn't seem to have a care in the world. “Does ruining my plans bring you some sort of twisted pleasure?!”

“Oh, hey!” said target suddenly exclaimed.

He cheerfully shifted his gaze toward Atsushi, completely ignoring the anguished shouting coming from the other side of the river.

“I just had a good idea. That guy over there's my coworker, so we could have him take us out to dinner!”

“Listen to me when I'm talking to you, for crying out loud!!”

Kunikida immediately hurled another shout across the river, his scowl twisting in even more disgust. He crossed his arms and started tapping his foot. Perhaps he was in a hurry to be somewhere.



Atsushi began worrying, and he meekly looked back at the man to his side.

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

Atsushi jerked in surprise at the sudden question.

“Atsushi...Nakajima...,” he timidly answered.

The man’s gaze relaxed ever so slightly under the evening sun’s warm glow.

“Then follow me, Atsushi!” he instructed gleefully. “By the way, what are you in the mood for?”

“...”

What do I want...to eat...?

Atsushi lowered his gaze where he was met with his own helpless shadow on the ground.

“Well...if it wouldn’t be too much trouble...,” he mumbled as he stared at his shadow.

“Come on, spit it out. Anything you want.”

“I would really like...some tea over rice right now.”

Embarrassment faintly dyed his cheeks crimson. It was the only thing he could come up with, after all.

“Hmm?”

The man stared wide-eyed for a few moments until...

“Pfft... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

...he burst into laughter, and his face glowed with a friendly warmth, although Atsushi had no idea what was so funny.

“This kid’s on the verge of starving to death, and all he wants is tea over rice? Very well. Kunikida can treat you to at least thirty bowls of the stuff!” the man said cheerfully. He seemed to be implying that Atsushi was in good hands now.

The man’s colleague immediately chimed in, clearly irritated: “Stop being so generous with my money, Dazai!”

“...‘Dazai’?” said Atsushi.

“Yep, that’s my name.”

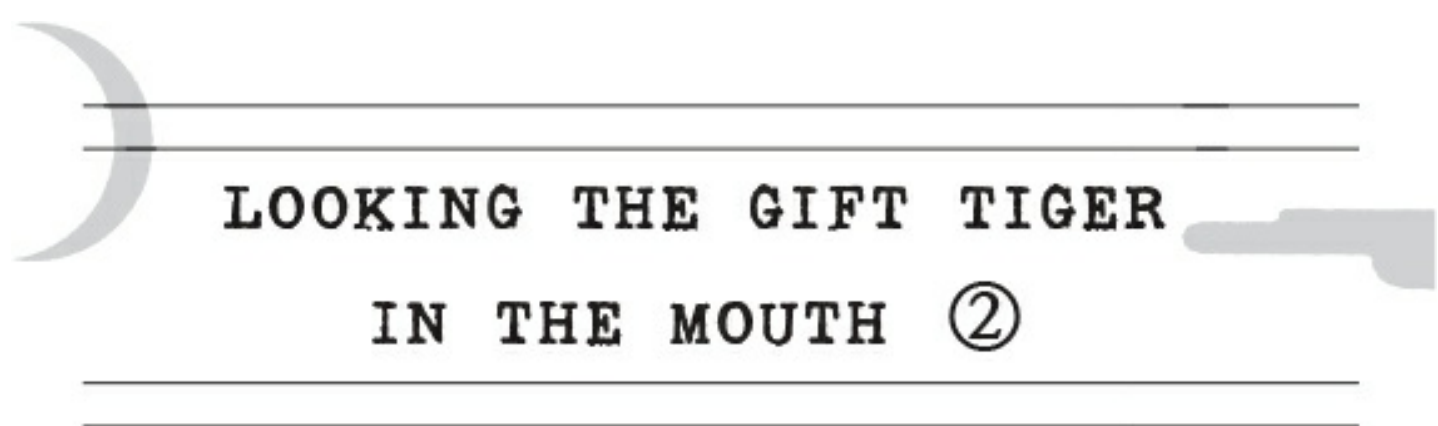
The man looked down at Atsushi with both hands in his pockets. Before Atsushi had even realized it, the breeze had picked up; the stranger’s sand-colored coattail was now fluttering in the wind.

“I’m Dazai.”

He squinted slightly under the darkening crimson sky.

When he turned around, his lips were curled into a vaguely mysterious smile.

“Osamu Dazai.”



LOOKING THE GIFT TIGER IN THE MOUTH ②

Osamu Dazai and his colleague, Doppo Kunikida, ended up bringing Atsushi to a small teahouse. It was near the wharf, so steam whistles could be faintly heard in the background. Half of the seats in the cozy establishment were cushions on tatami mats while the other half were modern chairs and tables. It was almost empty inside, perhaps because the teahouse had just opened for the night. The lights were dim.



*

The only customers were Atsushi and the two men who brought him there. The smell of broth slowly wafted through the air from the kitchen; the owner must have been in the middle of cooking something. All the food on the menu was listed on one wall.

Atsushi faced the table, hastily shoveling a bowl of tea over rice into his mouth. Stacked next to him were numerous already-empty bowls on the verge of collapsing. There had to be at least ten.

Dazai and Kunikida were seated across from him with just their teacups since they had already finished their meals. The tea, however, had been cold for a while now.

“Tsk. Unbelievable. What kind of fool says, ‘Gee, that looks like a nice river,’ and dives right into it?! And during the middle of work, to boot! Just look at what you’ve done! Now we’re way behind schedule.”



Kunikida, notebook in hand, had been complaining like this the entire time. Meanwhile, Dazai was resting both elbows on the table with his fingers

interlaced, but his bored expression made it obvious that he was hardly listening.

“You sure love your little schedule book, Kunikida.”

“This isn’t a schedule. They’re my ideals! My guiding light in life!”

Kunikida promptly stood to give an impassioned speech while tapping the cover of his notebook. Written on it with skillful penmanship was the word IDEALS.

“And nowhere in this book does it advise partnering with a suicide aficionado!”

Atsushi, cheeks stuffed with tea over rice, looked up at Kunikida. The roars of his stomach had finally died down, so he started listening to the conversation.

“Mfh nh mnrrginian frnmn?!” he asked, still chewing with his mouth full.

“Silence!” Kunikida immediately replied with a deep crease in his brow. He then dropped down into his chair, crossed his legs, and leaned back. “And my financial ledger says nothing about me paying for someone else’s endless supply of tea over rice!”

“Hngh rmmh?!” Atsushi leaned forward and joined the conversation.

“Like I said: We are working!”

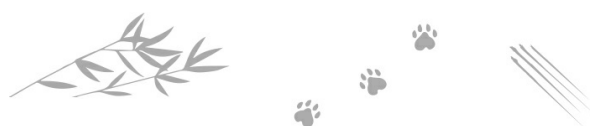
“Mmmngh?” Atsushi asked, curiously tilting his head.

““What kind of work?”” Kunikida repeated before adding, clearly irritated, “Let’s just say it’s military related.”

Meanwhile, Dazai looked back and forth between the two of them in wonder.

“How are you two...communicating right now?” he asked.

That put a stop to Atsushi and Kunikida’s conversation. They were both visibly surprised. Kunikida’s exasperated face implied that Dazai’s question was ridiculous; Atsushi nodded, then audibly swallowed the last bit of tea over rice in his mouth, his chopsticks still in hand.



“Phew! I’m stuffed! I don’t want to see another bowl of tea over rice for ten more years at least!” Atsushi declared with indisputable satisfaction after finally finishing his last bowl. He tenderly patted his swollen belly.

“You little... How can you be so shameless after eating on someone else’s dime?!”

Kunikida’s eyebrow began to twitch.

Atsushi lowered his gaze.

“...I really appreciate what you did for me,” he muttered softly. Kunikida’s expression turned serious once more. “I’ve been starving and homeless ever since I came here to Yokohama from the orphanage. I probably would’ve died if it wasn’t for you guys.”

Atsushi smiled uncomfortably. What would have happened to him if he hadn’t saved Dazai? If anything, perhaps it was Dazai who saved him.

“...You grew up in an orphanage?” Dazai asked.

“Well...I did, but then I got kicked out” was Atsushi’s honest reply. His mouth filled with a bitter taste.

“Wow... That’s coldhearted,” Dazai said while shifting his gaze to the teacup in his hand.

“We’re not a charity, Dazai,” Kunikida sternly cut in, quickly dampening the mood. “We don’t have time to go around helping everyone in need. Come on. It’s time to get back to work.”

“That reminds me...” Atsushi lifted his head up and looked at the two men across the table. “You said your job was military related, right? What kind of work do you do?”

“Heh... We’re detectives,” Dazai suggestively replied, holding up his index finger.

“...Detectives?”

Sure, neither of them seemed like they worked in a cubicle, but they didn’t exactly fit the look of a detective, either.

“We don’t hunt down lost pets or cheating spouses or anything like that, however. Have you heard of the Armed Detective Agency? We’re a group of detectives, each with unusual abilities,” said Kunikida, his eyes sharpening behind his glasses.

“Oh...”

Atsushi started tensing despite himself, and his face stiffened.

I’ve heard rumors about them before...

The Armed Detective Agency: a detective company specializing in dangerous work too dicey for the military or police to handle. An armed organization standing on the twilight, ruling over the threshold between the worlds of night and day.

And supposedly most of their members possess some type of special, otherworldly “skill.” So then...do these two also...?

Atsushi stared at them with bewilderment when suddenly Dazai let out a small yelp and perked up his head in realization of something. “Ooooh!” he squealed with delight, his eyes glittering. “I never noticed before, but there’s a really nice-looking lintel right there!”

When Atsushi looked up, he noticed a very thick, sturdy-looking slab of wood hanging horizontally, but he had no idea why Dazai’s bouncing eyes were passionately locked onto this beam-like piece of wood.

“Stop gauging opportunities to kill yourself everywhere we go!”

Kunikida, who had been checking the schedule in his notebook, fiercely glared at his partner. It was as if he saw right through the suicide-obsessed detective and knew exactly what he was thinking. He scowled, annoyed that he couldn’t let his guard down for even a second.

“I’m not! I was just thinking about how I could do neck extensions with it!”

Dazai pouted, apparently shocked that Kunikida would even suggest such a thing.

“...And what on earth is a neck extension?” Kunikida asked with a quizzical stare.

“Huh?! You’ve never heard of it?!” Dazai immediately replied, his eyes wide in astonishment. “It’s really good for stiff shoulders!”

“What...? It can do that?!”

“Hurry, Kunikida! Jot that down before you forget!” Dazai urged him.

Kunikida wasted no time opening his notebook, then began taking notes while muttering “Neck...extensions...” to himself.

“I made all that up, by the way. ♡” Dazai turned his head in the other direction with a mischievous, catlike grin.

“Rrrrgh!!”

Kunikida’s eyebrows furiously narrowed as he clenched his fists, mercilessly snapping his poor fountain pen in two.

Wham! He promptly slammed his notebook onto the table, then grabbed Dazai.

“Gwaaahhhehhh!”

He was so furious that he couldn’t even enunciate his words, wringing Dazai’s neck like an old damp rag. There was no need for some wooden lintel; Kunikida’s grip had more than enough force to send Dazai to the afterlife—yet Dazai showed no signs of struggle as he goofily smiled.

“Curses! I’ve got a partner who throws himself into bodies of water, a street urchin who treats himself to a buffet at my expense, and now my entire perfect schedule is ruined!” Kunikida tightened his grip around Dazai’s neck.

That certainly did sound like a rough day. All Atsushi could do was make himself as small as possible, since he did actually feel guilty for ruining Kunikida’s perfect schedule.

But there was still one question on Atsushi’s mind:

Do these guys really work for the Armed Detective Agency?

“We are going to finish today’s case exactly as planned. You got that, you blithering buffoon?!” Kunikida hollered, squeezing so tightly that he was about to snap Dazai’s head right off.

Today's case...

Curiosity suddenly got the best of Atsushi.

"So, uh... What kind of case are you on today anyway?" he asked.

"What?!"

"Eek?!" Atsushi shrank under Kunikida's threatening glare. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't have asked! Y-you're detectives! I should have known there was some sort of client confidentiality!"

After all, this job of theirs was military related. In other words, it wasn't something you could tell just anyone.

Kunikida eventually let go of Dazai, got back in his seat, and then cleared his throat.

"Today's case doesn't require secrecy of any kind, actually. The military asked us to locate a tiger."

".....A tiger?"

Atsushi's eyes opened wide. Even he could tell that he was turning pale. He wasn't hearing things, that much he knew. Kunikida made it sound like they were searching for a lost kitten, but he'd clearly said: *A tiger*.

The tips of Atsushi's fingers started going numb. He unconsciously clenched his fists.

"There's talk of a man-eating tiger that's been terrorizing the city as of late," said Dazai. "Granted, I don't know if it's *actually* eaten anyone, but it sure hasn't been shy about ravaging storehouses and devouring crops. And there have been numerous sightings of the beast around here lately..."

He shrugged as if to say that this tiger was being a real pain in the neck.

Golden eyes coldly glowing in the darkness.

The deep roar of a starving beast echoing through the night.

That tiger...

"...!"

Atsushi tried to stand, staggering to his feet, but he immediately tripped and fell back down onto his rear.

Thud! Rattle!

The chair hit the floor, bringing life to the silent teahouse.

“What’s wrong, Atsushi?”

Dazai gave him a puzzled stare.

“I—I...! I have to go! G-good-bye!” Atsushi yelled, his expression contorting slightly.

What a coincidence it was for these two people to be looking for *that tiger*. Atsushi couldn’t help but shut his eyes tightly.

I have to get out of here.

He tried getting up, but his legs felt like two wobbly noodles, so he began crawling as quickly as he could toward the entrance.

“Not so fast!” Kunikida yelled sharply, grabbing Atsushi by the collar and dragging him back. “You know something, don’t you?”

“Ah...! Ahhh!”

Atsushi wildly swung his arms and legs, struggling to escape Kunikida’s grasp.

“Y-you can’t...,” he whispered before swiftly looking back at the detective. “Nobody can defeat that thing!”

His voice was faintly trembling.

“You’ve seen the man-eating tiger?”

Kunikida furrowed his brow and fixed Atsushi with a quizzical gaze. “Suspicious” would be the best way to describe his expression.

“It’s after me! That beast almost killed me! And if it’s nearby, then I have to get out of here!” Atsushi desperately cried as his face continued to stiffen.

Out of nowhere, Kunikida released his collar.

Thud. Atsushi hit the floor.

Then Kunikida quickly grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

“Gaaah!” Atsushi groaned, face to the floor.

No matter how much it hurt, Kunikida wasn’t going to go easy on him. In fact, he was slowly twisting Atsushi’s arm with even greater force.

“You can pay for your meal with an arm—or by telling us everything you know!”

Kunikida’s intense shouting echoed throughout the empty teahouse. Atsushi clenched his teeth, squeezing his eyes as tears began to well up.

I should have never come here—I should have never gotten involved with these two.

“Come on, Kunikida. Relax. Whenever you want information out of someone, it turns into an interrogation. The boss himself has warned you time and again about this.”

Dazai stepped forward and tried to pacify his partner and then shot him an exasperated look. Kunikida scowled but realized he’d gone a bit too far; he let go of Atsushi’s arm and stood back up. Atsushi lifted himself off the floor before placing a hand on his throbbing shoulder.

“Now, then... What do you know about the tiger?” Dazai calmly asked, his gaze quietly fixed on Atsushi.

Atsushi couldn’t possibly talk his way out of this or deceive a man who could see right through him. That much was clear by the quiet, intense glow in Dazai’s eyes. After coming to that conclusion, Atsushi looked at his feet and hesitantly muttered: “...That tiger destroyed my orphanage.”

He clenched his fists, fighting the urge to tremble.

“It ravaged our crops, destroyed our chicken coop... Tore up the storehouse, too.”

I know that tiger all too well...

Fields with every last crop devoured... A chicken coop splattered with blood and feathers... The storehouse on the verge of collapsing... All this made it clear how vicious the tiger must have been.

“Nobody was killed...but the orphanage was too cash-strapped to recover...so

they kicked me out.”

“Get out!”

“You do not belong in this world!”

“Just go! Leave, you filthy freeloader!”

“But why? I didn’t do anything...”

Why were they being like this? The adults at the orphanage coldly looked down at Atsushi as he slowly drowned in confusion. That icy look in their eyes would never leave him.

With only a single, small bag, Atsushi had been forced out of the one place he ever felt like he belonged. Never would he forget how it felt to stand in front of the tall iron-rail gate in a daze as it closed behind him.

A heavy silence fell. Atsushi sat on the edge of the elevated tatami floors, biting his lip and looking down.

The silence lingered for some time...

Dazai then offered some words of sympathy: “Wow, sounds like you had a real stroke of bad luck.”

Bad luck...

Was that really all this was? Then again, there was no other way to describe it.

“Tell me about how the tiger almost killed you,” Kunikida demanded. His voice was void of emotion, causing Atsushi to tense up.

“No matter where I go...the man-eating tiger is there...like it’s chasing me. Even the other day, when I was by the Tsurumi River...”

Right...

If there was a source to all this misfortune, then it would have to be that tiger. That monster was the sole reason Atsushi was kicked out of the orphanage, and it was still causing trouble for him.

It happened a few days ago. Atsushi was tiredly hobbling down the road with the cold night breeze brushing against his cheeks. There were no streetlights.

Only the wintry glow of the moon illuminated the path below.

Suddenly, a passerby shrieked: *“A tiger... That’s a tiger!!”*

Atsushi slowly lifted his head to find an old, rusty convex safety mirror on the roadside.

Reflected in the mirror were large golden eyes staring right back at Atsushi.

The beast growled and bared its fangs. Every hair on Atsushi’s body instantly stood up, and he ran for his life, screaming at the top of his lungs.

That wasn’t the only time something like this had happened, either.

“I’ve seen the beast’s shadow more times than I can count these past two weeks since I got kicked out of the orphanage...”

And each time, he would run and hide until dawn. Day after day of fleeing had gone by in an exhausted blur until he eventually ran into Dazai and Kunikida at the riverbank.

“It’s probably in this city now because of me, too...,” Atsushi muttered, his voice trembling.

There was no way that more than one tiger was roaming the streets of Yokohama. If anything, it wasn’t normal for even a single tiger to be in the city. So where did it come from? No one had mentioned any tigers escaping the zoo, because if something like that really had happened, it would be all over the news.

“...When was the last time you saw the tiger?” asked Dazai, who had been quietly listening the entire time. It seemed like something was on his mind.

Atsushi lifted his chin ever so slightly and apprehensively met his gaze.

“It was around...four days ago by the Tsurumi River.”

“Yes, the attacks began roughly two weeks ago, and we have eyewitness accounts of the beast by the Tsurumi River four days ago,” said Kunikida.

He double-checked his notes and shot Dazai an urging glance.

“Hmm...” Dazai closed his eyes in thought and grumbled. A few moments later, he opened his eyes as if an amazing idea had just struck him. He grinned.

“Atsushi, you free tonight?”

“Huh?!”

Atsushi’s shoulders jumped in shock. Although Dazai was smiling, he looked like he was plotting something.

I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...! thought Atsushi.

“If the tiger is pursuing you, that actually works to our advantage.”

Dazai promptly turned back to face the table and began writing something on a sheet of paper.

“Uh...?”

Atsushi stared at him with utmost suspicion. What did Dazai mean that they could use it to their “advantage”? Whatever this was, it wasn’t going to be pretty. That much was for sure.

“You’ll help us find the tiger!”

Grinning from ear to ear, Dazai spun back around in his chair to face Atsushi.

“No way!” Atsushi jumped to his feet.

Is this some kind of joke? I never want to see that savage beast again, no matter what. If that thing finds me, I’m a goner.

“Here, Kunikida. Deliver this to the boss for me.”

Dazai wore a serious expression while he held out a slip of paper between his fingers to Kunikida.

“What? Are you seriously planning on capturing that tiger with him? Just the two of you? We need to verify this intel first, and—” Kunikida frowned, clearly not happy about Dazai’s decision.

“Just do it.”

Dazai spoke gently but decisively. After staring hard into his partner’s eyes, Kunikida let out a deep sigh, then grabbed the slip of paper.

He unfolded it and scanned the writing, but only his eyebrows slightly rose before he silently slipped the message into his pocket. Meanwhile, Dazai was

still full of smiles.

“I’m *not* going to help you catch that thing!!” Atsushi had his hands balled into fists.

Dazai didn’t merely want help searching the streets for this tiger...

“You’re asking me to be its dinner! No one in their right mind would want to be used as tiger bait!”

Atsushi owed these two for treating him to all the tea over rice he could eat, but repaying them by luring out a man-eating tiger was asking too much. It was unthinkable. That would mean his last meal was thirty bowls of tea over rice, and although he didn’t keep an obsessive schedule like Kunikida, dying that night was not on Atsushi’s agenda.

“We’ll pay you,” Dazai said softly.

“...Wait. You’ll...pay me...?” Atsushi’s ears perked up at those words. “Do you mean...?”

He almost turned around...but then he suddenly came to his senses.

“No, no, no! No way! I’m not sacrificing myself for a little cash!”

Atsushi didn’t have a single yen to his name, and he still didn’t have any income. He was at a loss. Nevertheless, he wasn’t going to let money blind him. He wasn’t foolish enough to become tiger bait just so that he could have a meal tomorrow, so he turned his head away from Dazai with his back still facing him. Human life was more valuable than money. Everyone knew that...and yet...

“Just out of curiosity, though... How much were you willing to pay?” Atsushi hesitantly asked, looking partway back at Dazai. There was no harm in asking, after all. He was only asking. Nothing more.

“Hmm...” Dazai pondered while punching numbers into a calculator. “How does this sound?”

He then held out the calculator.

The moment Atsushi looked at the numbers displayed, his eyes lit up. He immediately began counting all the zeros.

One zero, two zeros, three...four...five...?!

He couldn't stop himself from yelling:

"...Oooh?!"



LOOKING THE GIFT TIGER IN THE MOUTH ③

Why me...?

Seated atop a wooden crate with his arms wrapped around his knees, Atsushi was at a loss. They were inside a warehouse on the corner of the wharf. Moonlight peeked in through the window, illuminating dust as it floated through the filthy air. A departing freight vessel's steam whistle dully hummed in the background, slowly blending in with the waves until it could be heard no more. The breeze blowing through an opening in the building carried the soft scent of the ocean with it.

Dazai was also seated on a wooden crate a few feet away with his legs crossed while reading a book. He must have been really into whatever he was reading; he hadn't said a word since they arrived. Meanwhile, Kunikida was nowhere in sight; he was most likely still on his way back to the Armed Detective Agency.

Dazai had brought Atsushi to this warehouse over an hour ago. Long gone was any sunlight. Apparently, Dazai was planning on ambushing and capturing the tiger here. Whatever he was trying to do, it was extremely reckless. Atsushi honestly didn't think it was going to work. How exactly does someone catch a tiger anyway?

The only people here were Dazai and Atsushi. Dazai, a member of the Armed Detective Agency, may have been able to do something, but Atsushi couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag. Nevertheless, Dazai seemed to believe that the two of them alone could pull this off. Obviously, Atsushi wasn't planning on ever going along with such a reckless, spur-of-the-moment idea, and yet...

He wasn't blinded by money. Well, okay, maybe he was sort of blinded by

money, but only a little bit.

Even if he ran away, the tiger would eventually find him. Furthermore, maybe Dazai and the agency really would be able to capture the tiger if Atsushi used himself as bait.

It was that glimpse of hope that led him here.

Dazai didn't seem to be preparing to capture the tiger, though. He'd been sitting on that wooden crate and reading ever since they'd arrived. There was no way that book could be his weapon, although it did seem thick enough to maybe hurt somewhat if you hit someone on the head with it...

"...Dazai, what are you reading?" Atsushi hesitantly asked, feeling that talking would somewhat ease the fear and anxiety weighing him down. The silence was giving him too much time to think about the what-ifs.

Dazai, however, didn't appear to be worried one bit.

"A good book" was all he said before instantly absorbing himself in his reading once more.

"I'm surprised you can read in the dark like this."

Despite being used to the darkness, Atsushi could hardly see Dazai. He couldn't even make out his expression.



“I have good eyesight. Besides, I can basically recite this book from memory by now.”

“...Then why are you even reading it?” Atsushi said with a wry smile.

“Good books are still good, no matter how many times you read them.”

Yet another dead-end reply followed by a long stream of silence.

“...Is the tiger really going to come all the way here?” Atsushi wondered aloud.

He stared at the floor and curled into himself even further. The tiger had been appearing wherever he went as if it was stalking him, but he wasn't fully convinced it would conveniently show up tonight at this warehouse. Plus, there was a part of him that hoped nothing would happen, although it made him feel a little guilty since Dazai was earnestly trying to catch the tiger. However...

“It will,” Dazai insisted.

Atsushi twitched and let out a small yelp. He then lifted his head and slowly shifted his gaze toward the darkness; it felt like something was hiding there. His heart started to beat even louder and louder as if it were an alarm bell going off, warning him of danger.

I want to get out of here.

The feeling was overwhelming. Being in the darkness made him remember all the things he was trying to forget. He buried his face in his knees and shut his eyes.

I should've never agreed to do this.

“There's nothing to worry about... The tiger won't be able to get past me. I'm a member of the Armed Detective Agency for a reason,” Dazai assured him, nose still in his book as if he had too much free time on his hands.

How could he be so calm? This was a man-eating tiger they were up against. Although Dazai claimed he didn't know if the tiger really had ever eaten anyone, it still seemed very likely that such a beast eventually would. Plus, it could be anywhere that very moment, lurking in the darkness and waiting for its chance to strike.

“I wish I could be as confident as you,” said Atsushi. “Everyone’s always told me that I was worthless...and look at me now. I have no idea where my next meal will come from...or my next bed...”

“Get out!”

“You do not belong in this world!”

The voices seared into his memory whispered into his ear. Atsushi lowered his gaze and clenched his knees even closer to his body with his trembling hands.

“I guess they were right. Nobody cares what happens to me. I might as well just let that tiger eat me...”

Nothing good has ever happened to me. That’s probably—no, that’s definitely not going to change, no matter how hard I try. Nothing ever goes right. Things just keep getting worse for me. Why am I—?

“All right, then... Should be any minute now.”

Atsushi jumped, startled by Dazai’s voice. Dazai looked up from his book for the first time since they arrived and stared into the darkness behind Atsushi. The cold wind eerily howled as it crept through the warehouse.

Dazai’s gaze was fixed on a large window. Atsushi timidly turned to look.

Clang! Something suddenly fell onto the ground.

“Huh?!” Atsushi yelped. “I j-just heard a noise back there!” he nervously stammered while frantically trying to get off the crate, only to tumble over and fall.

After hitting the floor, he rolled over onto his feet, then promptly turned his terrified gaze toward a corner of the warehouse. Faintly visible within the darkness were bags and crates stacked all the way to the ceiling, but there were no signs of anything moving. Only a chilling silence reigned over the ever-growing darkness.

“Yep...”

“It’s here, Dazai! I just know it!” Atsushi insisted. His face was tense, and his voice was cracking.

“...The wind probably knocked something over.”

“That man-eating tiger is gonna eat me alive!” he shouted, borderline hysterical. His eyes were frantically darting in every direction. He felt as if sweat were dripping out of every pore.

Dazai slammed his book shut, making Atsushi jump and instantly close his mouth.

“Relax, Atsushi. The tiger isn’t going to randomly emerge from the shadows.”

Dazai faintly sighed. He was still calm even now.

“How do you know that?!” shouted an irritated Atsushi.

It was Dazai himself who clearly said the tiger would be here, and it was most likely already in the warehouse somewhere. Plus, it always seemed to appear randomly from the shadows without Atsushi ever noticing. And yet...

“It didn’t make any sense to start with,” said Dazai.

“...Huh?”

Atsushi, his face stiff, looked up at Dazai, who was still sitting on the crate. But before he could ask him to clarify, Dazai continued in his usual matter-of-fact tone.

“Poor finances or not, would an orphanage really dump its charges on the street, like a family of starving farmers from times past? Besides, kicking out a couple of children would hardly help their financial situation. They’d have to send at least half of their charges to another facility if things were truly that bad.”

He gently hopped off the wooden crate with the book in his hand.

“Wh-what are you trying to say, Dazai...?” Atsushi asked, clearly bewildered.

We have to run.

We have to get out of here.

The tiger’s gonna kill us both at this rate. There’s nowhere to hide inside this cramped warehouse.

Dazai faced Atsushi with a cold glow in his eyes, his expression unmoving.

Atsushi flinched and took a small step back.

Clatter.

He stepped on something and froze, then slowly lowered his frightened gaze. Stretching across the floor were the shadows of the window frame behind him and of himself. Maybe his shadow looked as dark and as tall as it did because of the intense moonlight peeking in through the glass.

“You arrived in this city two weeks ago. The tiger first appeared in this city two weeks ago as well,” Dazai quietly explained. His voice sounded like a distant dream to Atsushi, who was slowly looking back at the light as if it was drawing him in.

“You were by the Tsurumi River four days ago, which is exactly when the tiger was seen there.”

Only the pale glow of the moon reflected in his eyes.

Oh yeah, thought Atsushi as he recalled that night. The moon was quietly peering out from the darkness that evening as well. He’d looked up at its pale light in a daze. He had nowhere to go. He didn’t know what to do. All he felt was loneliness and anxiety.

That was when the tiger appeared.

“Do you remember what Kunikida said? The Armed Detective Agency is made up of people with unusual abilities.”

Unusual abilities.

Atsushi’s heartbeat grew louder, his pulse got faster, and he could no longer even move. His eyes opened wide.

The storehouse ravaged by the tiger...

The blood and feathers scattered about the chicken coop...

The remains of devoured crops...

His mind flashed back to the memories of his final days at the orphanage. He could still see the staff’s cold gazes and hear their furious shouting.

“Ah... Ahhh...!!”

Atsushi groaned and leaned forward slightly.

The golden eyes reflected in that rusty mirror suddenly crossed his mind. Then he was reminded of when he saw the tiger in the river’s reflection.

No, this had to be some sort of mistake. That was—

“Ahhhhhh!!”

A powerful roar escaped the depths of his throat as he covered his face with both hands.

“Though hardly public knowledge,” Dazai continued, still staring right into Atsushi’s eyes, “some people in this world possess otherworldly skills.”

“Ahhhhhhhhh!!”

Atsushi hunched over and roared with every fiber of his being, shaking the glass windows.

Fissures ran down his body as a pale light began to escape from within him. It instantly lit up the warehouse, flickering while it engulfed Atsushi.

“GAAAOOOOO!!”

However, Atsushi himself didn’t notice that his echoing roars were no longer human but that of a beast. Unbeknownst to him, the last vestiges of his awareness were being dragged into the abyss of darkness.



LOOKING THE GIFT TIGER IN THE MOUTH ④



Dazai faced Atsushi—what used to be Atsushi—with both hands in his coat pockets, watching the light radiate from his body as he gradually transformed. But Dazai was neither surprised nor panicked. His eyes were simply calm.

The boy before him was now a beast with four long limbs and snow-white fur with black stripes. Sharp claws extended from its paws, tearing into the floor and ripping up the concrete.



*

Nevertheless, Dazai continued to speak as if this was nothing important.

“While some are able to control these powers, others are destroyed by them...”

The tiger’s fiery golden eyes were locked on Dazai. Its fur stood on end with murderous rage; the beast looked ready to pounce on its prey at any moment.

Its deep growl echoed through the warehouse.

“The orphanage most likely knew who the tiger was all along; they just never told you. You were the only one who didn’t know.”

Atsushi surely could no longer comprehend what Dazai was saying.

The moonlight peeked through the windows and illuminated the white tiger—the tiger that the Armed Detective Agency was looking for.

“You are one such person who possesses a unique skill...”

But perhaps he no longer possessed the rational mind of a human or even a sense of self once he transformed into a beast. The tiger’s tail swayed while it slowly approached, growling as its elongated shadow stretched all the way to Dazai’s feet.

“One that transforms you into a ravenous beast beneath the moonlight.”

The tiger gradually leaned forward, and then in an instant, it leaped into the air as if its colossal frame were weightless before instantly landing right in front of Dazai.

“GRRRRRRRRRAAAAA!”

The beast roared, bared its fangs, and charged.

Any attempts to talk some sense into Atsushi would most likely be a lost cause, for there was no sign of Atsushi in the tiger’s eyes—there was only a ravenous beast staring at its prey.

Dazai leaped out of the way right as the tiger swung its claws. The beast crashed into a wooden crate before immediately spinning around and charging at Dazai again, now even more enraged. Dazai effortlessly hopped from crate to

crate, just barely dodging each swipe of the tiger's sharp claws. He smiled faintly.

"Incredible. You could effortlessly snap someone's neck with that much power."

There was a note of admiration in his voice. After all, the tiger's otherworldly physical abilities were beyond incredible. This beast was no different than an actual tiger, consumed by its urge to destroy.

It rampaged through the warehouse, turning the wooden crates into splinters, which Dazai leaped to avoid. He landed with both hands still in his pockets, sliding backward before stopping right in front of a wall.

"...Uh-oh."

There was nowhere left to run. One swing of the tiger's claws, and his life would be over. Nevertheless, Dazai's confident smirk was unchanged.

"Death at the jaws of a man-eating beast does have a certain appeal, but..."

Only at this moment did he finally take a hand out of his coat pocket.

The tiger jumped off a wooden crate and landed right in front of him with a heavy *thud*. Dazai, however, stared fixedly back at the beast and slowly stepped forward.

"GRRR..."

The famished tiger's deep growl pierced the cold air.

Step by step, the beast approached until it broke into a run in the blink of an eye, the tips of its claws carving up the floor.

After softly exhaling, Dazai stared straight back at the tiger.

"You cannot kill me."

The chilling light of the pale moon glowed in his eyes.

"Unique skill..."

His dignified voice reverberated throughout the warehouse as he took a step forward. Right as the tiger was about to sink its teeth into its prey's neck, Dazai's expression turned momentarily still.

“No Longer Human!”

He extended his left arm.

“My skill allows me to nullify the powers of others simply by touching them.”

His hand tapped the lunging tiger’s forehead.

Immediately, a blinding ray of light radiated from the tiger’s body, swiftly expanding in every direction, and a howl resounded while the outline of the tiger gradually lost form.

Dazai watched with a still gaze while slowly lowering his arm. Once the howling and light faded, the tiger was no more, and in the beast’s place now stood Atsushi with his eyes closed in the silent darkness.

He collapsed, completely unconscious. Dazai held him upright in his arms, then slightly narrowed his gaze.

After a brief moment of thought, Dazai’s usual blithe expression resurfaced. “I’m not into hugging other men!” he said before tossing Atsushi aside.



Atsushi hit the ground with a *thud* and whimpered. Being unconscious didn’t

mean that he was immune to pain, after all. Dazai stuffed his hands back in his pockets with a sigh.

“Dazai!”

Kunikida suddenly came running into the warehouse as if he’d been waiting for this exact moment. He observed the wreckage while he made his way over to Dazai.

“Oh, Kunikida. What took you so long?” Dazai gave a carefree wave. “I caught the tiger,” he announced with a smile.

But Kunikida, being the cold man that he was, ignored his colleague’s boasting.

“Wait,” Kunikida said. “Does that mean that he...?”

He looked down at Atsushi and faintly furrowed his brow. The detective clearly hadn’t seen any of this coming. Dazai’s smile faded as he shifted his gaze back to Atsushi.

“The kid’s a skill user. He can transform into a tiger.”

“Hmph...” Kunikida heaved a sigh.

“Hmm?” said Dazai.

“What on earth were you trying to accomplish with this message?!” Kunikida held out the note that Dazai gave him at the teahouse.

“‘The tiger will appear in the western warehouse in District Fifteen. Secure the perimeter to ensure that it doesn’t escape.’ Looks like a very simple and concise message to me.” Dazai grinned with evident satisfaction.

“It’s missing the most important part! Next time, explain things to me before you do something like this!” The crease in Kunikida’s brow deepened. “...We even scared up some off-duty staff for backup. You’d better treat them to a drink or something later to make it up to them.”

Kunikida must have been talking about the shadowy figures slowly approaching from the darkness, their footsteps echoing throughout the warehouse. Dazai glanced in their direction; he seemed to think there was no reason to bring this many people just to catch a little tiger.

Kunikida worries way too much...

His lips faintly curled into a smile.

“What? No casualties? Well, that’s disappointing.”

The clicking high heels belonged to a woman with a shoulder-length bob and a golden butterfly hair clip on the left side of her head. Other than her white collared shirt, which was perfectly fitted to her figure, everything she wore was black: her tie, skirt, and even her gloves.

Akiko Yosano, unique skill *Thou Shalt Not Die*.

With her was a young man whose newsboy cap, inverness coat, and very loose tie made him look like an archetypal detective.

Ranpo Edogawa, unique skill *Super Deduction*.

“You’re really getting good at this, Dazai. Still nowhere near as good as me, though,” he proudly claimed, pushing up the bill of his cap with a finger.

“So what are we going to do with him? He didn’t know he was the tiger, right?”

A small-framed teenage boy wearing a straw hat and old, beat-up overalls was crouched down by Atsushi’s side. The bridge of his nose was dotted with freckles; he seemed like a very simple, friendly person.

Kenji Miyazawa, unique skill *Undefeated by the Rain*.

Each one of them was a member of the Armed Detective Agency and possessed their own unique ability. That included Kunikida and Dazai as well.

“Hmm... What do you think, Dazai? The military now considers him a threat,” Kunikida said while he looked down at his notebook and frowned.

“Heh... Ha-ha.”

Dazai’s laugh was sinister, as if he was plotting something. He had his arms crossed and his index finger held up.

“I’ve actually already made a decision.”

Atsushi must have been completely worn out after rampaging to his heart’s content. He seemed so comfortable where he was lying on the floor,

unconscious. If anything, it looked like he was sleeping.

“Everyone’s always told me that I was worthless...and look at me now. I have no idea where my next meal will come from...or my next bed... I guess they were right. Nobody cares what happens to me. I might as well just let that tiger eat me...”

Atsushi had muttered those words earlier while tightly hugging his knees on top of a wooden crate in the dark warehouse. His hands had been trembling, and he’d sounded like he wanted to cry. Dazai cracked a smile as he recalled that moment.

The mission had been to capture the tiger, and that was what they did, so the right thing would be to turn Atsushi over to the ward as planned. But the situation was different now that they learned that this tiger was actually a young man with a special ability. Which meant...

“We’ll hire him!” Dazai proudly declared with a subtle but confident quirk of his chin. A cheerful smile played on his lips.

“Wow!”

Kenji’s eyes sparkled with joy.

“Seriously?”

Yosano rolled her eyes with a hand on her hip.

“I always knew you were an idiot, Dazai, but this clinches it.”

Ranpo shrugged. He’d seen this coming from miles away.

“Whaaaaat?!”

It was Kunikida, struck dumb with astonishment, who yelled the loudest before taking a step toward Dazai.

“What makes you think you have the authority to do that?!”

Dazai didn’t have the power to hire new detectives. There was only one person who had that right, and that was the president of the Armed Detective Agency. And who knew how he was going to handle this?

Dazai squinted and turned to Atsushi.

“Wake up, kid!”

His cheerful cry roused Atsushi, who groaned sleepily and faintly opened his eyes. The vacant look on Atsushi’s face made it evident that he still had no idea what was going on.

So began a bizarre tale: the story of an eccentric detective agency in a city teeming with mysteries.

This was a sign—an omen...

Dazai lowered his gaze and smirked.

Now, then...



LOOKING THE GIFT TIGER IN THE MOUTH ⑤

“Huh...?” Atsushi mumbled absent-mindedly as he got up. “I...”

After blinking several times, he slowly surveyed his surroundings. Although it took him a few moments, he soon remembered that he was in a warehouse at the wharf. Looking down at him were Dazai, Kunikida, and...a teenage boy he had never seen before, squatting by his side and staring at him with curiosity. He also noticed an unfamiliar woman and a man wearing a newsboy cap next to Dazai and Kunikida.

When Atsushi looked around in bewilderment, he noticed wooden crates and boxes that had been viciously shredded and scattered about. There were claw marks on the floor and walls as well. The sight was startling, to say the least.

This had to be the work of that tiger. That was the only explanation.

But when did all this happen? How long was I unconscious? The last thing I remember was waiting for the tiger while Dazai was reading a book in the dark, and he and I talked for a bit. That’s about it. I can’t even remember what we were talking about... I think it was just some random chitchat. What happened after that, though?

Dazai suddenly approached Atsushi in the midst of his bewilderment.

“Atsushi, do you remember anything about when you transformed?”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Oh, hey. Your right hand still hasn’t changed back yet.” Dazai pointed at Atsushi’s arm.

“...My right hand?”

Atsushi shifted his gaze to his soft, fluffy hand. He moved it around a bit, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Wait... Fluffy...?

“Whaaaaaa—?!”

Atsushi couldn’t stop himself from shouting as he threw his head back.

For some reason, his right hand was covered in soft, snow-white fur with black stripes, and he even had squishy pink “beans” where his palm should be. It was as if he was wearing some sort of glove.

“Ahhhhhh! What is this?! What’s going on?!”

Atsushi shook his right hand in a fluster, but no matter how hard he tugged on it, all he felt was the intense pain of his hand about to be ripped off. It was clearly a feline paw, no matter how you looked at it...although it was far too big to belong to a regular house cat. Not to mention, no ordinary house cat’s claws would look this sharp.

It was a tiger’s paw. That much was obvious.

“Wh-wh-what the heck is happening?!”

Atsushi was distraught. Was his hand going to be like this for the rest of his life? Was he going to have to live with this fluffy, soft hand?



Th-this can't be real!

“Atsushi Nakajima!”

He jumped when someone suddenly called his name, then timidly shifted his tear-filled eyes to Dazai. And Dazai wasn't the only person staring at Atsushi—everyone there was looking at him.

Dazai flashed a brazen smile at Atsushi's puzzled expression and declared:

“From today forward, you're one of us!”

Atsushi stared in bewilderment.

“You're a member of the Armed Detective Agency,” Dazai added. His tone had somewhat mellowed, and there was a warmth in his eyes.

A member of the Armed Detective Agency...

Kenji was grinning, Kunikida was scratching his head in annoyance, and Yosano and Ranpo both looked like they wanted to roll their eyes.

“.....Sorry?”

Atsushi cocked his head all the way to one side and knitted his brow.

What in the world is going on?

Only one thing was clear: Whatever had happened, it had already ended by the time he woke up.

I honestly thought I was going to starve to death until I found Dazai floating


down the river. Next thing I know, I was being treated to all the tea over rice I could eat. Then Dazai and Kunikida turned out to be members of the Armed Detective Agency, and they coerced me into helping them find that tiger.

And yet I went to that warehouse fully prepared to be tiger bait.

Life is nothing more than a series of unforeseen occurrences. You might think you had it bad only to realize later that it was actually a stroke of good fortune. On the other hand, something might seem like a blessing at first but end up turning into a nightmare. It's reminiscent of the parable "The Old Man Who Lost His Horse" or the saying "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth"—although *tiger* would be more fitting in this case. You can't always tell how things will shake out.

But perhaps this particular series of coincidences was actually calculated and all part of somebody's plan.

The pale moonlight from the window illuminated Dazai's face, his hands still in his pockets, while he looked down at Atsushi's uneasy expression. The detective curled his lips into a cryptic smile, just like he had back at the riverbank.



A CERTAIN EXPLOSIVE ①

The scent of tatami mats—something I hadn't smelled in ages.

I'd been sleeping on the street for a while, so the stench of the damp evening dew and grass were almost all I knew, save for the various city odors mixed in. That's why the smells of old tatami mats and someone's home were so comforting and missed.

"Mmm... Hmm?"

Atsushi grunted and cracked open his eyes. His vision was still blurry, blinded by the morning sun peeking into the room from somewhere.

"Where am I?" he mumbled. "I remember last night I was..."

Atsushi traced his hazy memories.

He could remember the warehouse at the wharf. That was where Dazai had asked him to help find the tiger. But then, for some reason, Atsushi passed out, and by the time he woke up, everything was already taken care of.

Furthermore...

"Atsushi, do you remember anything about when you transformed?" Dazai had asked the night before while Atsushi sat in a daze.

"...What are you talking about?"

Dazai then pointed at Atsushi's arm. *"Oh, hey. Your right hand still hasn't changed back yet."*

"...My right hand?"

And when Atsushi looked down, his right hand had turned into a soft, fluffy—

"Eek!"

Atsushi sat up in a fluster, thrusting his blanket aside. He hesitantly looked down at his right hand...but there was nothing strange about it at all. His hand

was normal. No fur, no sharp claws. It wasn't a paw but an ordinary palm.

He sighed in relief, slowly releasing the air pent up in his chest. Then, he opened and closed his hand a few times, but not only did it not hurt, it didn't even feel any different.

It was all a dream.

Except it wasn't. Although they felt like a series of otherworldly events, everything that happened yesterday was real. There was no other way to explain why Atsushi was here. If none of that had happened, he'd be lying in some field or sleeping in a back alleyway right now.

Atsushi slowly observed the room he was in: tatami mats and a low dining table leaning against the wall. The futon was placed in the middle of the room, and there appeared to be a small kitchen close by. Despite being in an old, wooden building, the room was clean without any clutter.

The morning sun reflected off the sparkling windows, and the chirps of frolicking sparrows could be heard coming from the yard.

He wasn't awakened by the cold, unforgiving rain. This was what should have been ordinary. It was a morning just like any other for most people.

Atsushi looked up in a daze at the light dangling from the ceiling.

"This is the first time in weeks I've had a roof over my head..."

Beep, beep, beep! Beep, beep, beep! Beep, beep, beep!

"Ah?!" Atsushi jumped, startled by the sudden beeping. "What's going on?!"

After crawling out of bed, he timidly looked around until he found the source of the noise lying by his pillow. It was a cell phone.

"Y-yes?! G-give me a second! I'll be right there!"

He fearfully but hurriedly grabbed it. He'd never had a cell phone in his entire life, so while he knew he had to press a button to answer a call, he had no idea which button that was.



*

Ahhh! Wh-what am I gonna do?!

The phone continued to relentlessly threaten him with more beeping even while he panicked. It appeared that whoever was on the other line wasn't going to give up until someone answered.

"Wh-which button is it?!"

At a loss, he pressed the button with the symbol of a phone on it, then hesitantly placed the device to his ear.

"H-hello?!"

"Good morning!"

He blinked in mute amazement when he heard the merry voice on the other end.

"Oh... Dazai? Is that you?" he asked, overcome with relief.

Dazai was the one who got Atsushi the room at this dormitory to stay in, so it

was only natural to assume that he'd gotten him this phone as well. Besides, there was nobody else who would call Atsushi, and that was why he was somewhat embarrassed for panicking so much.

"Nice weather we're having today, huh? How do you like your new lodgings?"

It was most definitely Dazai's voice on the phone. Atsushi swiftly looked over to the window where he was met with the blinding light of the morning sun.

"I feel like I'm living in a palace in the clouds thanks to you...especially after sleeping on the streets these past few weeks." He gently smiled.

"Glad to hear it. The clothes by your bed are a present from everyone at the agency."

Neatly folded by the pillow lay new clothes. The cloth bag Atsushi had been using ever since he left the orphanage was placed on the floor by the clothes as well.

"Thank you so much for everything."

Atsushi smiled blissfully. Although he was apprehensive about helping search for the tiger at first, he would never have been able to wake up with a roof over his head like this if it hadn't been for Dazai.

"By the way, Atsushi, I really hate to do this to you on short notice, but..." Dazai began. *"We have a situation, and it's urgent."*

His tone was unexpectedly serious.

Atsushi knitted his brow, sensing the man's restlessness. "An emergency...?"

"Yes, and it's a race against time. I need you to meet me somewhere right now. You're the only one I can count on!"

Dazai sounded almost like he was pleading.

"Su-sure, of course. I'll be right there," Atsushi nervously replied, his expression serious.

Dazai, a member of the Armed Detective Agency, had said that this was an emergency and he needed Atsushi's help, which meant this had to be something big.

I don't know how much help I'll be, but I have to do what I can.

"Ready to go, Atsushi?"

"Ready."

Atsushi put on his shoes and quickly looked up.

"Once you step outside your room, I need you to close the door..."

After leaving his dorm room, Atsushi closed the door as requested. Then he was immediately hit with his next order.

"...and look behind you!"

"Behind me?!"

But when Atsushi swiftly turned around in the outdoor corridor on the second floor, he immediately did a double take at what he saw out of the corner of his eye in the dormitory's garden.

Wh-what the heck...?!

In the middle of the weed-infested garden was a young man with disheveled hair and a sand-colored coat.

"Hey!" the man called, smiling up at Atsushi.

Of course, there was only one man like this who Atsushi knew: Dazai.

Atsushi promptly rushed down the corridor and scuttled down the rusty stairs, then ran over to the unnaturally placed metal barrel in the middle of the yard.

"Uh... What's going on?" he asked, just to be on the safe side.

"Take a guess," Dazai replied.

He appeared to be stuck inside the barrel. His body was folded down the middle with both feet pointing up at the sky in a position that didn't exactly scream comfortable. Never once in Atsushi's life had he seen someone stuffed so bizarrely in a barrel before. In fact, getting stuck in a metal barrel was most likely something that rarely happened. Only one thing was clear: This appeared to be Dazai's so-called emergency.

“Umm... Am I hallucinating?” said Atsushi.

Or maybe some sort of weird dream?

“Nope!” Dazai lightly replied.

Some people used these barrels to take baths, but it didn’t look like that was how he ended up like this. There wasn’t even a drop of water in the barrel. Which meant...

“Were you ambushed? Did you fall into someone’s trap?!”

Atsushi’s voice was trembling. Dazai was a member of the Armed Detective Agency, so maybe one of their enemies caught him unawares and shoved him in this barrel after a fight to the death. Or maybe he used it to roll away from the enemy, barely escaping with his life. There was no other explanation for why he would be stuffed in a metal barrel on the morning of such a fine day.

“I crawled inside this myself.”

“What?!” shouted Atsushi, taken aback.

“Well, you see...I heard about this new method of suicide where you stuff yourself in a barrel, so I thought I’d give it a try.”

E-excuse me...?

Atsushi’s eyes opened wide in disbelief.

“Incidentally, it turns out this is more painful than lethal. To make matters worse, I’m now completely stuck, and I can’t pull myself out. I think I’m going to die.”

Oops-a-daisy! That was essentially what his semi-troubled expression was saying. He appeared to be using every bit of strength he had left just to keep himself from slipping farther into the barrel, but gravity was slowly winning out.



*

“Uh... But if you’re looking for a way to kill yourself, then couldn’t you just stay here until this kills you?” Atsushi asked, perplexed.

“I’m into suicide, not pain! What kind of sick person do you think I am?”

Dazai looked at Atsushi as if the boy had lost his mind.

“Uh-huh...”

It didn’t make much sense, but this seemed to be yet another failed suicide attempt.

“Besides, I figured out this wasn’t used as a suicide method—it was used for torture!”

Dazai scowled as he continued to slip into the barrel.

Atsushi decided to deal with this “emergency” the best way he could...by pushing the barrel over. He then placed his hands on his hips and sighed.

Dazai had saved Atsushi the other day when he unknowingly transformed into a tiger and tore up the warehouse, so while the man may have had his...quirks, he was still a member of the Armed Detective Agency.

“Uh...?” Dazai said languidly when the barrel began to roll.

Although it was difficult to even imagine, Dazai was, in fact, a skill user, and he’d used his unique skill to turn Atsushi from a tiger back into a human.

Unique skills...

There were far from a few people in this city who possessed otherworldly powers, and Atsushi was one of them. However, that discovery didn’t change the reality that he faced. Being able to turn into a tiger wasn’t going to help him in any way. It just gave him yet another problem he had to deal with.

Maybe he could use this special power to put on some sort of acrobatic performance to earn a little income.

That was too risky, though; turning into a tiger gave him amnesia and made him go berserk.

In other words, I'm still useless.

And yet:

"Atsushi Nakajima! From today forward, you're one of us!"

Those were the words Dazai said to him that night, even though he knew that Atsushi turned into a tiger and had no control over what happened.

"You're a member of the Armed Detective Agency."

Atsushi was only where he was today because of those words.



"Mmm...!"

Dazai stretched out an arm after crawling out of the barrel. He must have felt really stiff and sore from being in that position for so long. He swung his hips around and smacked his shoulders to loosen up while Atsushi sat on the barrel's side and idly watched. But after some time went by...

"Whew. That was painful." Dazai took a seat by Atsushi. "I owe you one, Atsushi. My body would have been permanently folded straight down the middle if it wasn't for you."

"...Why didn't you ask someone else in the agency for help?"

Dazai placed his hands on his hips, then stretched backward as far as he could.

"I did! I called them and told them I was going to die. And you know what they all said? 'Congratulations.' Can you believe it?"

He pulled himself upright, then turned to Atsushi, clearly perturbed.

"Yeah, that makes sense... Ah-ha-ha-ha..."

Atsushi laughed awkwardly, his eyebrow twitching.

It sounded like Dazai's colleagues already knew exactly what kind of person he was. This was probably an everyday occurrence for them.

“Skill users are all twisted people if you ask me,” Dazai grumbled, facing forward.

Skill users...

Atsushi faced forward as well, lost in thought.

“Dazai...,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Hmm?”

“These...detectives at the Armed Detective Agency—they really are all skill users, right?”

“Yep. We take on foes even the military police can’t handle.”

There was a hint of pride in Dazai’s voice.

Atsushi hung his head and fell silent. Then casting aside any remaining doubts, he continued: “...I don’t belong here.”

“You’re an amazing skill user yourself.”

“Sure, transforming into a tiger is a unique ability...one I have zero control over. It happens seemingly at random, and it’s not like I can voluntarily transform.”

He couldn’t even remember what happened while he was in his tiger form. No self-awareness, no voice of reason—all he could do was destroy.

This was surely going to end up being no different from when he was at the orphanage.

“So...I don’t think I’m going to be of any help to you guys. I really appreciate the thought, though.” Atsushi hopped off the barrel and looked down at his feet. “I’m sorry.” He dipped his head.

Dazai was still facing forward with his eyes on the dormitory.

“...What do you plan on doing now?” he asked Atsushi.

“I’m going to start looking for a job that even I can do.” Atsushi forced a smile. “I doubt it’ll be easy, though...”

“I know a job you could do.” Dazai glanced at Atsushi out of the corner of his

eye, his lips curling into a faint smile. "...I could hook you up, if you want."

"Really?!"

Atsushi's face lit up. With Dazai's help, he might even get a job right away. At the very least, Atsushi felt far more hopeful now, since he had originally planned on aimlessly looking for work on his own.

Visibly excited, he swiftly lowered his head. "Thank you so much!"

Life always extends a hand to you; you'll never know if it's a helping hand unless you take it.



A CERTAIN EXPLOSIVE ③

Yokohama, home of the Armed Detective Agency, is a mix of modern high-rise buildings crammed together along with old-fashioned shops from a previous age.

Atsushi was gazing at the silhouettes of the skyscrapers piercing the sky in the distance while he walked down a cobblestone street with Dazai. They were on a bright, tidy street in a shopping arcade. People came and went as they enjoyed shopping under the shade of the roadside trees.

"I'm taking you to meet a guarantor who can hook you up with some work. I just know he's going to love you."

Dazai was walking by Atsushi's side. He sounded a bit excited.

"What kind of work are we talking about?"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise. ♡" Dazai grinned cryptically. "Oh, there might be a little test before he gives you the job, though."

"A t-test?!"

Atsushi's face clouded with fear. He thought he was going to be hired on the spot, so hearing there was a test took him by surprise. He hadn't studied for any test, and he sure wasn't mentally prepared for one, either.

“Atsushi, do you know how to write?”

“Uh... I can read and write, yeah,” he answered honestly, albeit hesitantly.

“Then you’ll be fine!” Dazai beamed.

“Trust me. I know you can do it,” he added, encouraging Atsushi with a hint of sweetness in his voice.

“Thanks.”

Atsushi smiled and sighed with relief. He almost regretted saving Dazai at the river when he first met him, but perhaps it was a good thing. After all, Dazai had taken such good care of him—a complete stranger—ever since.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Yes, you should feel grateful!” Dazai said as he placed his index finger and thumb under his chin. “Just leave everything to me, and all will be well! For I, Dazai, have earned the full confidence and respect of the people!”

His lips curled smugly as if they were being inflated with narcissism while his eyes sparkled brilliantly. He probably thought he sounded really cool.

However...

“There you are, Dazai!” came a voice from among the crowd.

“Hmm?” wondered Dazai and Atsushi, turning around to find Kunikida striding toward them as if he had been looking everywhere for his colleague.

“You bandage-squandering machine!”

“Gaaah!”

Dazai bent backward as far as he could. Then he covered his face with his hands, trembling as if he’d just received the shock of his life. He seemed to be at least a little hurt by what Kunikida said.



“K-Kunikida... That nickname you just came up with... Not bad!”

His face contorted with the frustration of defeat as he staggered.

Kunikida placed a hand on his hip and smugly snorted, then pointed right at Dazai’s face.

“You claim to have earned the full confidence and respect of the people? The only things you’ve ever earned are complaints, curses, and irate phone calls from clients!!”

“Huh...?”

C-complaints, curses...and irate phone calls from clients?

Atsushi eyed Dazai skeptically.

“Come on, when has anyone ever complained about me?”

While Dazai pouted like a man falsely accused and looked away, Kunikida swiftly took out his notebook and began flipping through the pages.

“We received a phone call in August,” he began.

““Found one o’ yer workers caught in our fishing nets off the coast. Could ya come ‘n’ get him?””

Kunikida skillfully replicated what sounded like a middle-aged fisherman’s

voice.

“Er...”

Atsushi’s cheek began twitching slightly.

Maybe—okay, more than maybe—this worker was Dazai. He’d probably been trying (and failing) to drown himself. Atsushi didn’t even want to imagine what it was like to unload that net and find Dazai among the flopping tuna and flounder.

Furthermore, it appeared that this wasn’t the only time someone called to complain about Dazai.

“We received another call in September!”

Kunikida’s glasses glinted as he promptly gave another example before Dazai could come up with an excuse.

“I done found this odd fella buried in ma field. I believe he works with y’all?”

This time Kunikida sounded like a middle-aged farmer with a slightly low voice.

“Mmm...”

Atsushi groaned and hung his head in anguish.

Indeed, that was definitely the work of an “odd fella.” The farmer was probably so startled that he threw out his back. Once again, harvesting Dazai along with pumpkins and radishes was not something that Atsushi wanted to imagine.

“Th-th-th-that’s...”

Dazai cringed and teetered backward.

“Yet again, we received another call in September!” Kunikida relentlessly continued his rant as if he was venting months’ worth of pent-up anger.

““It’s about time you closed your tab. Your drinks these past six months weren’t free, you know.””

This time he sounded like a cute lady who worked at a bar; he maintained his overly serious expression even as he spoke in a high-pitched voice. Imagining

the scowl on his face when he got that call wasn't difficult.

Atsushi stared at Dazai as if he was observing a madman.

"This can't be happening...!!" the man who claimed to have the full confidence and respect of the people painfully cried, wrapping both hands around his head. He leaned back as far as he could and nearly screamed in disbelief.

"I had no idea you were this good at doing impressions, Kunikida!"

Overpowering rage immediately radiated from Kunikida's body, cracking his glasses.

"You little...! I have had it up to here with you and your sarcasm!"

As the veins bulged on his forehead, he wrapped his hands around Dazai's neck so tightly that it looked like it was going to snap. He then proceeded to shake his colleague as if to say, "Today's the day you meet your maker!"

Nevertheless, Dazai still didn't learn his lesson. If anything, he actually looked disgruntled; he must've been wishing that a beautiful woman was about to snap his neck instead of Kunikida.

Should I be worried that this is the guy hooking me up with a new job?

Concern began to show on Atsushi's face as he watched their exchange.

Dazai's honeyed words had almost hooked him. What if Dazai was actually going to sell Atsushi to someone in order to pay off his six-month bar tab?

Although that was somewhat unrealistic, Atsushi was still extremely skeptical. He had a feeling that he was going to end up in a life-threatening situation if he kept hanging around Dazai.

"Oh, right! I cannot believe I just wasted an entire minute humoring this idiot."

Kunikida must have realized he was wasting time he didn't have because he suddenly stopped shaking Dazai. Apparently, he hadn't been searching Yokohama for his partner simply to unload his pent-up rage.

"We have to hurry back to the agency!"

He grabbed Dazai by the lapel and reeled him in, but Dazai's expression remained as calm as always, conveying absolutely no sense of urgency.

"Why's that?" Dazai asked.

"We have an emergency on our hands! A bomber has taken a hostage and barricaded himself inside the agency!" Kunikida explained through his obvious irritation.

Even Dazai couldn't hide his surprise; his expression immediately turned serious.

"A bomber?!"

Atsushi's face went pale the instant he heard the unbelievable news.

A certain explosive.

Atsushi's test had begun.



Their destination was a building on the corner of a crossroad: a classy redbrick structure that was showing its age. It wasn't particularly tall; the first floor was a charming café that served really good coffee.

Kunikida and Dazai confidently strode into the building. They didn't seem to feel that there was anything odd about Atsushi joining them.

"Hey, uh...," Atsushi timidly mumbled from behind Kunikida.

"What?" replied Kunikida, lowering his voice without turning around. "The agency is on the fourth floor."

"No, it's not that...," Atsushi said quietly, looking uncomfortable.

"Let's take the stairs just in case," Dazai suggested in almost a whisper.

He avoided the elevator in front of them and headed toward the stairwell. Both he and Kunikida seemed to be more than ready to storm the agency office with Atsushi while there was a mad bomber inside.

Their careful footsteps echoed up the dim staircase. At this rate, Atsushi really was going to get swept up in this mess.

“Guys...!”

Starting to panic, he spoke just a bit louder when he called out to the detectives.

“Keep your voice down!” reprimanded Kunikida, causing Atsushi to switch back to mumbling.

“Sorry...”

“Get ready, Atsushi,” Dazai urged with a serious tone as he remained facing forward. They were almost at the fourth floor.

“All right...,” Atsushi reluctantly replied. There was no going back now.



It's not often someone walks into a building where a bomber has barricaded himself with a hostage. No one ever expects something like that to happen to them.

That was exactly how Atsushi felt up until a few minutes ago.

The inside of the Armed Detective Agency on the fourth floor looked like a movie to Atsushi as he found himself witnessing an intense standoff.

“I can't... I can't take it anymore...,” a young man muttered almost deliriously, sitting on the edge of a desk with his back to the window.

He appeared to be around Atsushi's age—perhaps eighteen. He was slender with fair skin peeking out from the collar of his slightly oversized sweater. Your average teenager.

...The only difference was that he was holding a detonator in his hand.

Planted down in the chair by his side was a girl in a high school uniform with long black hair—obviously the hostage, seeing as she was bound and gagged. On the verge of tears and clearly terrified, she looked to the young man and the detonator in his hand.

The contextual clues all pointed to this young man being the bomber.

Kunikida and Dazai crouched while they boldly stepped inside the tense office, and Atsushi, who was in a helpless fluster, had no choice but to follow them.

“This is all their fault... If it wasn’t for the Armed Detective Agency...”

The bomber covered his face with one hand and glared at every agency member in the office. These were the eyes of someone who had completely given in to despair.

“Where’s the boss?! Get him out here now!”

His cry echoed throughout the office, and the female staff, who were secretly watching him from the nearby room, hid in fear.

“Hurry up before I blow this place and everyone in it to smithereens!”

The young man grabbed the hostage’s collar and jerked her close. Her face immediately tensed and went pale as she trembled.



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“A man with a grudge... These guys are the worst...”

“Agreed...”

Dazai and Kunikida were whispering back and forth from behind a partition.

“...Why am I even here?” Atsushi mumbled in despair while sandwiched between them.

He felt like a fish out of water, especially since he wasn't even a member of the agency. What he needed to do right now was meet this guarantor Dazai had mentioned, take a little test, and get a job. What he absolutely wasn't supposed to be doing was confronting a bomber at a detective agency.

"He's angry with the agency about something," Kunikida bitterly muttered while knitting his brow.

"Can I go? I doubt I'm going to be able to help you guys with this," Atsushi whispered.

"True," Dazai admitted, "our work tends to attract ire from a variety of sources."

"They're ignoring me..." Atsushi heaved a disappointed sigh.

Of course, he felt like he owed them after all they did for him, but he was only going to get in the way here. Worst-case scenario, he'd end up just another meaningless casualty. Atsushi was really hoping they'd realize this...

Nevertheless, he was no longer in any position where he could simply get up and leave. Plus, the bomber would definitely see him the instant he stood up, and he most likely wouldn't let Atsushi go even though Atsushi wasn't a member of the agency. If anything, the bomber would take him as another hostage—or worse.

"The bomber's not bluffing—those are high explosives. If that thing goes off, this entire floor will be reduced to ash."

Dazai offered a calm explanation while he looked at the small explosive on top of the desk. All it would take was one push of the button on that detonator to trigger the bomb's countdown.

"Oh no...", a shocked Atsushi miserably whined.

"We could cover the bomb with something to dampen down the explosion...", Dazai noted, one hand on his chin in deep thought.

Put simply, they could absorb the explosion somewhat if they placed a sturdy helmet or something over the explosive.

"...Not in this situation, though. And honestly, what kind of coward takes a

woman hostage?” Dazai shut his eyes in anguish.

“...Who is she even?”

Curiosity got the best of Atsushi. He figured that this girl had nothing to do with the agency, since she was a hostage.

“Her name is Naomi. She works part-time here.”

“She works here?! So she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

Atsushi sympathized with her since his situation was somewhat similar.

The bomber even had his arm wrapped around her in a blind rage. This girl was clearly tough; most people would have fainted in her position.

“...What do you want to do?” Kunikida whispered to Dazai.

“Why don’t we let him talk to the boss?”

Atsushi casually glanced their way.

The boss...?

“Because he’ll try to kill him, that’s why!” argued Kunikida. “It’s a good thing the boss is away on business right now...,” he added, pushing up his glasses.

“Which gives us only one option,” Dazai replied with a serious expression. He swiftly held out a hand and got into a stance for combat.

Kunikida clenched his hand tightly as well, preparing himself for battle. The tension between them slowly escalated.

Are they going to use their powers?!

This was the Armed Detective Agency, and both Dazai and Kunikida were skill users. Although the bomber may have been holding a detonator, he was still just an ordinary person...which meant he would be no match for these two detectives.

Atsushi watched with bated breath as the pair tensely stared at each other until— “Hmph!”

“Hmph!”

—they simultaneously swung their arms, both throwing rock. A draw.

“Hmph!”

Yet again, they vigorously swung their arms, but this time, they both threw scissors.



...They were playing rock-paper-scissors.

They were seriousness personified as they continued to throw hands with so much determination that this may well have been a matter of life and death. After they both threw paper, they swung their arms one more time as if this would be the match that determined the winner...and it was.

The match was over.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha!”

Dazai cackled proudly after throwing paper again.

“Rrgh...!”

Kunikida grunted with regret, his closed fist trembling.

“Go on now,” Dazai urged him.

Kunikida quickly albeit reluctantly got up, revealing his location to the bomber. Even though it may have only been rock-paper-scissors, a loss was a loss, and he was going to respect that.

He boldly strode over to the enemy.

“I need you to calm down, young man,” he demanded with clear irritation in his voice.

“Stay back!” the bomber shouted. “I only wanna talk to the boss! Try anything funny, and I’ll blow this place sky-high!”

“All right...” Kunikida frowned in annoyance at the bomber’s yelling.

“I know you. You’re Kunikida... You’re trying to get me to lower my guard so you can use that freakish skill of yours on me! Well, it’s not happening! I want you on this desk on all fours with your hands where I can see them!”

The bomber held out the detonator.

“Hrm?!” Kunikida shot an irritable glare at the young man, forcing him to slightly recoil. Nevertheless, the bomber still had the advantage—he was the one with the explosive. He promptly resumed his aggressive demeanor as if he had just remembered that fact.

“If you don’t do what I say, I’m detonating this thing and taking everyone with me!”

Now his finger was hovering over the detonator button. He was obviously too enraged to think clearly anymore. No sort of reasoning was going to work on him.

Kunikida let out an annoyed sigh, then began to climb onto the desk as ordered.

“This is bad...,” Dazai said gravely while Atsushi watched in suspense by his side. “The bomber must have done his homework; he seems to know our agents’ names and faces. Which means I’d only further irritate him if I tried reasoning with him.”

Kunikida probably wouldn’t be able to use his skill effectively with his knees and hands on the desk.

Then... Does that mean...?

Kunikida had mentioned that the president was away on business. There were no other employees in sight, which meant they were all probably out as well. Therefore, if neither Dazai nor Kunikida could do anything, then only the female staff—who were still hiding in fear—could do something about this. However, depending on them to solve this dilemma would be far too cruel. These were

office workers, not combatants.

Which left just one person...

“Whatever are we going to do?” Dazai mumbled theatrically. He glanced in Atsushi’s direction, causing the boy to jump.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...,” said Atsushi.

He froze, hesitantly shifting his eyes in Dazai’s direction where he was met with Dazai’s hopeful gaze.

“Atsuuushiii!”

“Nope!!” Atsushi promptly refused and averted his gaze.

“I still haven’t even asked you anything.”

“You don’t need to! I know what you’re going to say!”

Even though he’d only known Dazai for about a day, he already had a good idea of what kind of person he was. Atsushi had to be firm and turn him down. He’d just get himself in trouble if he gave in.

Then again, it felt a bit late for that since he’d already come all the way here with them...

“Listen, Atsushi.”

It was as if Atsushi were talking to a different person. Not only did Dazai’s tone change, but his expression was extremely serious as well.

“You’re the only person the bomber doesn’t know since you don’t work here.”

Atsushi tightly clenched his fists as he listened.

“But I...I wouldn’t be able to do anything even if I tried!”

There was no way for a regular person like Atsushi to stop a bomber. He wasn’t trained for this. He wasn’t a detective with unique skills like Dazai and Kunikida. It was painfully obvious what would happen if he tried to help, and it wasn’t going to be good. If anything, he was going to make the situation far worse than it already was.

“Don’t worry...”

Dazai left his side, staying low while he moved toward the corner of the office so that the bomber wouldn’t be able to see him.

What’s he trying to do? Or more like what’s he trying to make me do?

“You just need to distract the bomber. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Dazai, who was rummaging through a box, suddenly lifted his head.

“Hmm... How about you distract him by pretending like you’re some down-and-out loser?”

He returned with a stack of old newspapers and a sash.

“Here, these are your props.”

He smiled. It appeared he wanted Atsushi to do something with these.

This is ridiculous!

How on earth were a stack of old newspapers and a sash going to help stop a mad bomber?

Distracting the bomber was a lot easier said than done. It might even backfire and make him attack Atsushi. If only they’d had a steel shield or bulletproof jacket lying around... Even a helmet would’ve been better than *this*. None of those things would have solved the problem, but they’d at least be better protection than a bunch of old newspapers.

“Trust me.”

Those words prompted Atsushi to lift his gaze from the sad stack of newspapers.

“Trouble like this is child’s play for the Armed Detective Agency.”

Dazai’s smirk was dripping with confidence.

This mad bomber’s barricaded himself inside the agency with a hostage, and Kunikida can’t move. Things are looking pretty bleak. So how is Dazai so confident right now? I would never be able to muster up that kind of courage.

“Uh-huh...,” Atsushi replied hopelessly. He didn’t seem to have any other

options.



A CERTAIN EXPLOSIVE ⑤

It wasn't like Dazai was asking Atsushi to fight the bomber or to defuse the explosive as if he were a member of the military police's bomb squad. He'd never be able to do any of that.

Atsushi was simply being asked to distract the agitated bomber for just a few moments. That was all. Dazai and the others would handle the rest.

At least, that was what was supposed to happen...

"Th-th-that's enough, please!" Atsushi yelled with what little courage he could muster while timidly stepping forward.

His legs trembled and his voice pathetically cracked. To make matters worse, he started retreating despite himself.

"Wh-what are you even trying to accomplish? I—I bet y-your parents would be really disappointed if they saw you now!"

He was putting everything into the act, but even he could tell how stiff his delivery was. If anything, it would be strange if the bomber didn't find this suspicious.

"Who the heck are you?!" the bomber demanded.

His piercing gaze alone was enough to make Atsushi's legs give out, leading him to stumble theatrically and fall on his rear.

H-h-h-h-help meeee!!

"Eek! I'm sorry!"

Atsushi desperately waved his hands and curled into a ball. The bomber wasn't much older than him, but he still had an explosive powerful enough to take out the entire floor and everyone on it. Atsushi, on the other hand, was equipped with only a stack of beat-up old newspapers. It wasn't even fair comparing them.

All he ever wanted was to find a new job, get a roof over his head, and live an honest life. Yet somehow, he found himself confronting a mad bomber.

Atsushi was on the verge of tears. Perhaps it was the moment Dazai got involved in his life that settled his destiny for things to never go the way he'd planned (although his plans weren't as meticulous as Kunikida's). In a way, Atsushi felt like he understood why Kunikida was always so irritated around Dazai. That didn't make him feel any better, though...

"You're not one of the detectives, are you?" the bomber asked.



“A-a-as you can see, I’m j-just a passing paperboy!”

Atsushi nervously held up the stack of old newspapers.

“And what the heck’s a paperboy doing here?!”

The bomber skeptically knitted his brow.

He was right. It was the middle of the afternoon, which was far too late to deliver the morning paper and far too early to deliver the evening paper. Plus, what kind of paperboy would come all the way up to an office on the fourth floor? It was only natural for the bomber to have doubts.

Dazai’s plan is far too reckless. No way this is going to work. But there’s no use whining about it; we can’t back down now. Dazai doesn’t look like he plans on leaving his hiding spot, either. Maybe that means I have to keep going. How much longer do I need to distract this guy, though?

“I get that you hate the agency, but that doesn’t mean it’s okay to take a hostage and blow the place up! You can still turn your life around, but you have to be alive for things to get better!” Atsushi staggered to his feet, his voice trembling.

“...How are things gonna get better?”

“Urk...!”

Atsushi found himself stumped by the question.

“I said, how exactly are things gonna get better?!” the bomber repeated in annoyance.

Huh? Uh... Th-th-that’s a good question...

Atsushi was merely saying the first thing that came to mind in order to persuade the bomber to stop. He actually had no idea how exactly things were going to get better.

He started panicking, desperately tracing his memories for an answer, but all he could come up with were memories he wished to forget.

Almost nothing good ever happens to me. But still, there has to be something. Something good that makes me glad to be alive. At least one thing—

“You’ll.....”

“I’ll what? Spit it out already!”

The bomber glared at Atsushi the moment he began timidly opening his mouth. Startled by the young man’s impatience, he continued in a fluster: “Y-y-you’ll be able to eat tea over rice again!”

Kunikida, still on all fours atop the desk, nearly collapsed.

The bomber looked extremely baffled. Atsushi knew he said something stupid, but that was the only good thing he could think of.

“You can eat tea rice until you’re stuffed! You can sleep somewhere with a roof over your head! You can go to bed, and when you wake up, it’s morning! And that will be what’s normal!”

Atsushi was rambling and raising his voice. The bomber appeared to be at a loss.

“Uhhh... But...if you detonate that bomb...you and me won’t get up in the morning...because...”

Atsushi swiftly lifted his head back up and declared:

“...we’ll be dead!”

“That’s the whole point!” the bomber yelled.

“Agghhh?!”

Atsushi was astounded, retreating a few steps. He was visibly confused, unable to comprehend the bomber’s response.

“Uh... I just—I don’t think you should do it, man. I mean, if you die...you die, y’know?”

He placed a hand on his face and looked despondently toward the bomber.

Once you died, it was over. Everything. Atsushi had no idea what the bomber had been through, but this wasn’t the right way to go about things.

“I know there are times when you might wish you were dead, but there are people trying to live, no matter how hard things get. Like...like me!”

He smacked his chest.

“I have no family or friends, and I was kicked out of my orphanage... I’ve got nowhere to go, no one to turn to...”

And I even turn into a tiger from time to time...

Atsushi immediately started feeling depressed. He hung his head lifelessly.

It’s just one thing after another. Why do only bad things happen to me? To top it all off, I’m standing in front of a mad bomber with no way to stop him from blowing up this place whenever he feels like it.

“Yeah, you got me!!” Atsushi shouted desperately as he quickly stood up straight again. “I’m not good at anything, and I’m objectively useless just like you said, but even then...I haven’t given up on myself! I want to live!” Tears were welling up in his eyes.

The bomber’s cheek twitched as his expression stiffened. He looked even more frightened than Atsushi. The shoe was now on the other foot, apparently.

“Good job, Atsushi. That went beyond acting. You really played the perfect down-and-out loser,” Dazai whispered with a smirk from the shadows. Of course, Atsushi couldn’t hear him, and of course, he wasn’t acting, either.

“So forget that bomb, and let’s go look for a job together!”

Atsushi swiftly approached the bomber, leaning forward until their faces almost touched. He’d completely forgotten that he was supposed to be pretending to be a paperboy.

Getting a job meant having a roof over your head. It meant being able to stuff your face with tea over rice until you couldn’t eat another bowl. It meant sleeping in a soft, comfortable bed. And if this young man had all that, he wouldn’t even think of ever bringing a bomb into a detective agency.

People did bad things when they’re hungry, and Atsushi himself already knew what it was like to give in to despair. Nothing good came from it. So what this young man probably needed was a job, a warm bed, and some tea over rice.

And what he definitely did *not* need was a bomb. Nothing like that would ever help him in life, and he needed to get rid of it as soon as he could. Therefore,

Atsushi needed to find a decent job with this bomber and take one step closer to a future that was filled with hope, not despair.

“Sound good?!”

Atsushi wore a completely serious expression as he leaned in even closer to the young man.

“Wh-what? But I’m not looking for a job...”

The young man’s cheek twitched while he recoiled.

Atsushi had completely lost sight of his objective and role, but he still ended up successfully distracting the bomber, whose thumb was no longer hovering over the button on the detonator.

Dazai wasn’t going to let this chance slip by, and he immediately jumped to his feet.

“Kunikida, now!” he yelled.

“I know!”

As if he’d been waiting for this very moment, Kunikida wasted no time pulling out his notebook, his fountain pen effortlessly gliding across the paper.

“Unique Skill: The Matchless Poet!”

He tore out a page with the words *WIRE GUN* written on it.

“Wire gun!”

The sheet of paper clutched between his fingers suddenly began to take form.

This was Kunikida’s unique skill: He could materialize whatever he wrote in his notebook.

In other words, that was no ordinary piece of paper in his hand. It was an *actual* wire gun.

“Oh no...!” the bomber muttered as his eyes opened wide, but it was too late. Kunikida was already aiming the muzzle forward; he pulled the trigger with perfect precision, knocking the detonator out of the young man’s hand. The impact caused the bomber to instinctively shut his eyes.



*

“Get him, Kunikida!”

Dazai’s voice sharply echoed throughout the tense agency.

“Quit barking orders!” Kunikida grabbed the bomber by the collar. “I obviously wasn’t going to simply let him get away!” he hissed while throwing the young man with one arm.

The bomber spun in the air before landing on the ground with a *thud*.

“Gwaaah!”

He wailed painfully as Kunikida twisted his arm behind his back, pinning him to the floor. It all happened in the blink of an eye, and the detonator was already in Kunikida’s hand.

“All right, folks, that’s a wrap. Good work,” Dazai said after abruptly appearing out of nowhere.

...Is it over?

“Whew...”

Atsushi tiredly took a seat where he was standing. It was as if the relief had sapped every last bit of energy out of his body.

Thank goodness. I was worried about what was going to happen for a second there. That life-shortening experience was hopefully the first and last of its kind.

The tension in the agency dissipated, and the female staff in the neighboring room started clapping.

Yet the man of the hour, Kunikida, was surly.

“‘Get him’? ‘Good work’? You did absolutely nothing but give obvious orders while we did all the work!”

Kunikida was the one who had captured the criminal and safely grabbed the detonator, so perhaps he felt like Dazai had been using him.

“Hey, it’s not my fault, Kunikida.” Dazai proudly smirked with his hands in his coat pockets. “You’re the one who lost at rock-paper-scissors.”

“You little—!”

Kunikida’s voice and fists shook with frustration.

“Come on, don’t sweat the small stuff. You caught the bad guy. Isn’t that enough?” Dazai’s tone was mild, but his face almost immediately clouded with worry. “From what I hear, if you keep letting every little thing bother you, you’ll get wrinkles and age faster.”

“What?!” Kunikida’s expression turned grave. “Is that true?”

“Better write that down before you forget.”

“Being high-strung...accelerates aging...”

Kunikida promptly began taking diligent notes.

“I made that up, by the way. ♡” Dazai averted his gaze and wore a smug grin.

The next moment, yet another high-end fountain pen snapped in Kunikida's hand.

"Haaaaaahhh!" Kunikida shouted as he kicked Dazai as hard as he could from behind.

"Gwah!"

Dazai was sent flying forward, slamming into the door before cartoonishly sliding to the ground. A very impressive kick.

"Stop making fools of people for your own pathetic amusement!" Kunikida yelled, veins bulging on his forehead.

"Speak for yourself!" the bomber cried, grabbing Kunikida's arm from behind. Kunikida had been distracted for only a brief moment.

But that was more than enough time for the young man to kick him in the back and pry the detonator out of his hand. Kunikida stumbled forward. By the time he'd regained his footing, the young man already had his finger hovering over the detonator's button.

"No!"

Kunikida's face drained of color.

"How dare you make a mockery of me!" the bomber yelled in between heavy, unsteady breaths. "Skill users really do have twisted minds... Every last one of them," he muttered in disgust while looking up at the ceiling.

He smirked, and everyone watched with bated breath when all of a sudden...

...he pushed the button to detonate the bomb.

Immediately, red numbers appeared on the explosive lying on the desk.

0:30:00...

"It's gonna explode in thirty seconds?!"

Atsushi was closest to the bomb.

0:29:99...

Kunikida reflexively threw himself toward the explosive.

“I’m not going to let that happen!”

But the bomber immediately tackled him, and they both crashed into the nearby desk.

“Kunikida!” Atsushi shouted in a panic. The time remaining only continued to vanish.

0:23:35...

“What are we going to do?!”

Sweat was pouring down his face; his throat felt drier than a desert. At this rate, everyone here was going to— ***“We could cover the bomb with something to dampen down the explosion...”***

He suddenly recalled what Dazai said earlier and began darting his eyes around the chaotic office.

“There has to be something I can use...”

0:19:93...

“There’s gotta be something... Come on!”

Atsushi was in full-panic mode. His racing heartbeat only got louder and faster.

That was when he met the gaze of the hostage who was still tied up on the floor by the desk. She looked up at him, trembling and desperate for help. Atsushi stared wide-eyed at her, his expression still tense. Then he gritted his teeth.

0:13:87...

He grabbed her by the wrist and threw her as far away as he could. She landed in Dazai’s arms.

“Atsushi!” Dazai yelled, startled.

Atsushi immediately swiped the bomb off the desk and curled his body over it on the floor. Dazai’s eyes widened in astonishment, and he gasped.

“Hmm? What am I doing?” Atsushi muttered with a blank look on his face.

It all happened almost unconsciously.

He didn't have a second to even think about it. He had to do something, and he couldn't think of any other way. It was as if his body was acting of its own accord.

What he did took everybody by surprise. Not even Atsushi himself could believe it.

“You idiot!”

He heard Dazai furiously shout at him in the background.

0:03:68...

I'm an idiot...huh? Yeah...I guess I am...

Atsushi shut his eyes tight. He didn't want to die. Not even a little bit.

My existence is worthless... I don't deserve to be alive...

Maybe they were right...

But still...!

The bomb he had clutched to his stomach continued its rhythmic ticking. It was all going to be over soon. Atsushi's palms were covered in sweat.

If I knew something like this was going to happen...I would've had Kunikida treat me to at least another ten bowls of tea over rice...

The thought idly crossed his mind while each second ever so slowly passed by.

0:00:01...

Beep!

It was the sound signaling that time had run out. All that followed was silence.

“...?”

Atsushi, trembling with the bomb in his arms, timidly opened his eyes and saw that the timer had stopped at 0:00:00 like a broken piece of junk.

“Good grief... I knew you were dumb, but I wasn't expecting you to be *this* dumb...”

It was Kunikida who finally spoke up, crossing his arms and staring at Atsushi in exasperation. Still holding the bomb, Atsushi slowly got to his feet and stared blankly as though he had no clue what was going on.

“He has the makings of a fellow suicide enthusiast. Wouldn’t you say, Tanizaki?” Dazai asked with a grin.

All of a sudden, the bomber slowly peeked his head out from behind Kunikida.

“I’m really sorry about all that. You okay?” said the young man called Tanizaki, his hands clasped together in apology. He was wearing a very kind expression, a complete 180 from only moments ago.

“Huh...?!”

Does that mean...this was...?

Atsushi’s cheek began to twitch.

“Oh, my sweet, sweet brother!” the supposed hostage cooed as she aggressively charged straight for Tanizaki. “Are you all right?” she asked while tightly embracing him, accidentally head-butting his chin in the process and sending his upper body bending backward.

“Oof?!”

But even then, she still went ahead and rubbed her cheek against his.

“Oooh! ♡ Your little bad boy act was so cute. ♡”

“My chin...,” mumbled Tanizaki. The girl’s overly intense displays of affection had him on the verge of passing out.

She continued to bury her face in his chest. There was no longer any sign of terror in her eyes, of course.

“I didn’t know how much more I could take! ♡ Ooh! Let’s continue where we left off when we get home. ♡”

“So the girl working part-time here was in on this, too...?”

Atsushi bitterly smirked. He’d picked up on what was going on and was uncomfortably trying to look away.

“If you want someone to be mad at, be mad at Dazai. Or be mad at yourself

for relying on someone like him to introduce you to a job.”

Kunikida offered an inkling of sympathy, even though he was scowling to show that he wanted no part in these shenanigans.

“Wait... Don’t tell me...”

Atsushi turned a hardened glare at the man who was behind this absurd game.

“I told you there’d be a little test, didn’t I?” Dazai casually replied without a hint of guilt.

In other words:

“That was my entrance exam?”

“Precisely,” came a powerful voice from the back room.



“The exam finished without any issue, boss,” one of the female employees lined up at the door politely reported.

A man with silver hair and a sharp gaze stepped into the office. His kimono was a subdued color that blended perfectly with his calm features.

“Mmm...” The man nodded, tucking his hands into his sleeves as he walked right by his staff.

“...‘Boss’?”

Atsushi was still crouching with the bomb clutched to his chest when he looked up at the newcomer.

The atmosphere seemed to instantly tense when this man showed up. He had dignity and a powerful presence that made him somewhat intimidating.

President of the Armed Detective Agency: Yukichi Fukuzawa. Unique skill: *All Men Are Equal*.

“Dazai over there informed me of a ‘promising young man,’ so I wanted to test the veracity of your soul,” he stated while looking Atsushi right in the eye. That alone was enough for Atsushi to unconsciously tense up in awe.

“See, I recommended you to the boss, but remember, you’re wanted by the local ward in your beast form. We had a little dispute here at the agency on what we should do with you,” Dazai revealed with a shrug.

“But Dazai insisted...” Fukuzawa lowered his gaze midsentence, not saying another word. Dazai simply smiled in silence as well.

Kunikida turned to Fukuzawa. “So what is your decision, sir?”

Dazai chuckled almost inaudibly, his hands still stuffed in his coat pockets.

“...I’m leaving that to Dazai,” the president grandly stated before he turned on his heel as though there was nothing more to say.

“I won’t let you down, boss,” Dazai replied while he watched Fukuzawa retreat to his office.

“H-hold on, Dazai.” Atsushi frantically stood back up with the completely unassuming fake bomb still in his hands. “So...that job you said you’d give me

was...”

“You’re hired.”

Dazai spun around and jovially grinned at him.

“Welcome to the Armed Detective Agency, Atsushi Nakajima.”

Kunikida knitted his brow and worried if this really was the right choice, but he had no intention of opposing the president’s decision.

“Congratulations! ♡”

Naomi beamed and dragged her brother over by the arm.

“Glad I could help.”

Tanizaki bashfully placed a hand on the back of his head.

“Wait, wait, wait! I can’t work here! It’s way too dangerous!” Atsushi cried in a panic.

He personally didn’t feel like he’d actually done anything. Unlike Kunikida, he hadn’t used his powers to stop the bomber.

Obviously, that was part of their plan, but still... All I did was pathetically run around in a panic. It’s kind of bizarre that they’d even want to hire me after that.

“I was impressed. You used your own body to cover the bomb to save everyone here.” Dazai’s eyes somewhat gently narrowed. “I know you can do it. You’ll be fine,” he added to encourage Atsushi.

“Yeah! I was really touched by what you did!” Naomi chimed in animatedly.

“But...”

Atsushi fell silent, too exhausted to even get another word out.

Everything I did was purely unconscious. I’m no hero, and I wasn’t trying to pull off an act of bravery. This is nothing I deserve praise for.

I was scared. Nothing more.

Me, a pathetic little coward—

After returning to his office, Fukuzawa sat behind his large, heavy desk to think.

Other than the guest chair and desk, there was also a large bookshelf. Although this was a Western-style room just like the others in the agency, there was a beautifully designed tatami room in the back as well.

A calm silence reigned over the office as Fukuzawa recalled the day Dazai stopped by.

“If the strongest skill user in the world suddenly appeared, would you hire them?”

That was the first thing Dazai had asked him as he stood before Fukuzawa’s desk.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean they would make a good detective,” Fukuzawa had replied.

Dazai’s expression immediately softened, and he broke out into a grin.

“That’s exactly why I recommend we hire him.”

There was a knock at the door in the midst of recalling his exchange with Dazai. After a brief moment, it opened, revealing his secretary, Kirako Haruno, who excused herself before walking over to his desk with a teacup on a tray. She placed the cup on Fukuzawa’s desk; it must have just been brewed as it was still steaming.

“...Does this mean that you also believe he should work at the agency?” Haruno asked curiously while holding the empty tray under her arm. Fukuzawa reached for the cup of tea, his eyes narrowing slightly.

A test of the veracity of the soul.

That was the true purpose of the entrance examination.

The instant the detonator’s button was pushed, Atsushi’s expression turned

desperate. He flung the hostage as far away as he could, then used his own body to cover the bomb. He did all that, despite how afraid he was of dying. That was the kind of person Atsushi Nakajima was.

He had a unique ability that turned him into a tiger, but there was so much more to him.

Something about him made even Dazai become a fan and recommend him for the job.

Fukuzawa brought the teacup to his mouth when he suddenly noticed something floating in the tea.

“Ah...” Haruno softly grunted in realization. There was a single tea stem in the cup. “The tea stalk is floating upright. It looks like today is our lucky day, President Fukuzawa.” She beamed.

Fukuzawa smiled faintly. He then silently brought his tea to his mouth and took a sip.

“Ow...!”

Although Haruno was an extremely capable secretary, the tea she made was at times far too hot.



It was a sluggish early afternoon at the agency once everything had calmed down. It must have been around teatime; the female staff were now chatting in the back room, which could be heard all the way in the main office.

Dazai was leaning against a desk.

Kunikida was at his own desk, finishing up his work after having wasted far too much time today.

Meanwhile, Tanizaki’s little sister, Naomi, was grinning from ear to ear with her arms affectionately wrapped around her brother’s neck.

And as for Atsushi: He was sitting in an empty seat, still clutching the now-

unneded fake bomb.

No matter how long I think about it, my answer's still the same: I can't do this.

The bomb scare was already more than enough for me, and stuff like that is probably an everyday occurrence at the agency. I seriously doubt I can manage in an environment like this...which means I just need to be firm with them and—

“Granted...we won't force you to work here if you really don't want to,” Dazai suddenly said, clearly disappointed. “But if you do end up leaving...” He placed a hand on his chin as if he was deep in thought. “I would really worry about you. You'd have to vacate the company dorm, for starters.”

Atsushi hesitantly averted his gaze.

Oh, right...

The Armed Detective Agency's dormitory was for staff only. An outsider like him couldn't stay there forever...which meant he would be back on the streets with nowhere to go. Drenched in the rain, trembling in the cold, he'd end up collapsing by the riverbank where he would...

Atsushi thought back to those painful days, making him even more visibly conflicted.

“You don't have any special qualifications, any friends, or even any acquaintances, so finding a job would be extremely difficult, too!”

“Mmm...”

Atsushi let out a worried moan. He looked even more anxious.

“And to top it all off, you're a wanted man—or tiger, I should say!”

“Ahhh!” Atsushi cried, caught off guard once again by Dazai pointing out the cons.

Oh, right. I completely forgot about that because of the whole bomb scare.

Nobody's going to hire me like this!

Atsushi grabbed his head in despair. He had no idea when he would turn into a tiger and go on another rampage, causing all sorts of trouble for other people.

It wasn't like he could write “I can turn into a tiger” under his special skills on

a résumé, either. Even if he did, no company would be crazy enough to hire him.

...Except one, that is.

“And if someone ever found out your secret, it wouldn’t matter how good you are at your job. You’d be fired. Worst-case scenario, the military police capture you, take you behind the barn, and shoot you!”

Dazai wore a grave expression with his hand still on his chin.

They’d shoot me?!

“Eek!” A frightened yelp escaped Atsushi’s throat.

That was the last thing he wanted. *Anything but that*, he thought.



*

“None of that would be an issue if you worked at this agency, though.”

It was as if horns were growing out of Dazai’s head as he flashed a sinister smirk and stole a glance at Atsushi.

“A-are you saying...?!”

Atsushi tightened his arms around the bomb.

I don't have a choice?!

“I'm looking forward to working with you, Atsushi,” Naomi said enthusiastically. “And so is my sweet brother here! ♡”

She affectionately tightened her arms around Tanizaki.

“Bffaaah!” Tanizaki groaned in pain as his sister accidentally strangled him.

Kunikida, who was working at his desk, abruptly spun around in his chair and faced Atsushi.

“Just follow the rules.”

That was all he said before spinning back around, seemingly exasperated. At least he appeared to be welcoming Atsushi to the company...

“Great! ♡ It looks like you've made up your mind,” Dazai added with a mischievous smirk.

“But... But...!”

The word *pathetic* wouldn't be doing Atsushi's expression justice.

Dazai never lied to him, though. He introduced him to a job. There was a test, and Atsushi managed to pass...even though he never imagined the test would involve a bomb.

Regardless, he wouldn't have to leave the dormitory now, and he could go to bed at night with a roof over his head. Everything worked out in the end. This made him happy, but...

Am I really going to be okay.....?

He couldn't help but feel that every single thing went exactly how Dazai intended it, that the moment he found him in the river was the moment his luck ran out. And yet...

Atsushi glanced at Dazai.

“Just leave everything to me, and all will be well!” Dazai had confidently

declared with the most brilliant of smiles earlier that day.

Maybe this is a sign of good luck to come.

Or maybe it's actually the opposite.

Whatever the case, I feel like I could spend a lifetime thinking about this man and still never understand him.

Atsushi crouched forward and deeply exhaled as if he had a lot on his mind.

Dazai, on the other hand, smiled with evident satisfaction.

Atsushi Nakajima.

The Armed Detective Agency's newest member.

Special Thanks

Original Story
Kafka Asagiri

Manga Illustration
Sango Harukawa

Director
Takuya Igarashi

Series Composition and Script
Yoji Enokido

Character Designer and
Chief Animation Director
Nobuhiro Arai

Animation Studio
Bones

Production Team
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