Curiosity Killed the Executive (not really, though).

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by the_mackerel

Summary

Chuuya gets turned into a cat. The universe, being what it is, makes sure Dazai finds him first.

He’s a cat.
Tiny, soaking wet. His hat is safe, but God knows where his wallet is. He cannot speak, he cannot call for reinforcements. He is powerless.
And to make matters worse it’s raining ca–ah ah, very funny, fuck off.

Notes

So, I somehow procrastinated editing this fanfic for so long that I ended up intercepting Dazai's birthday (and pride month)! Hilarious, really /s.
Let's see it as: the universe gifted him a cat, kind of.
It's not as polished as I'd like it to be, but it's here, and even if it's not perfect I hope that you'll find it enjoyable!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Dusk is where the small things dwell.

Something is wrong in the air.
It can be felt in the silence that has swallowed the entire warehouse district. It's a prelude to either something terrible or a particularly vicious rainstorm, if the dark clouds above his head are reliable narrators.
Chuuya Nakahara stands in the centre of the wreckage: three collapsed buildings, a shipping container crumpled like mere paper. Only a lamp-post is left standing, a resilient and slightly apologetic sentinel.
That's not what the report said at all. *Rogue ability user my ass.*

"Come on," he says, kicking a rock just to break the stillness. It collides with what remains of a wall; only half of it is still standing. "Come the fuck out!"

Yes, shouting at enemies that are potentially trying to spring an ambush isn't wise, in general circumstances. Yet, here he is, and by virtue of this fact he can afford to shout and taunt: what's the worst thing that could happen? A gun? A bomb? No biggie, nothing can escape gravity. Or him, for the matter.
Shouting simply makes the process quicker, since he's aching for a sip of decent wine and the softness of his own bed.

The reply finally comes, impossible to pinpoint: a raucous laugh expands in waves seemingly originating from everywhere. Is the ground itself breathing? *What the hell…*
His gloved hand instinctively lands on his hat: he's ready to jump, to dodge.

The source of the chaos, and of the very expensive property damage surrounding them, finally appears. It must have been a man, maybe, and it can still pass as one. If you squint. If you squint really fucking hard.
Unfortunately, Chuuya *is watching*, and that thing's shadow doesn't match the body: it slithers, it flickers, stretching over the debris with nothing truly casting it. The shadow keeps swirling, circling the figure as an overexcited pet would.

"Alright, you're not a normal ability user," Chuuya concludes, cracking his neck to roll out the tension in his shoulders. "I've killed plenty of not-normal shit, don't ya worry."
The figure doesn't give an answer, of course, what has he been expecting? Yet the flesh, on what supposedly is its face, shifts and settles, with eyes blinking open in spots where there should be none, and a smile that shows way too many teeth. None of them is human; they're way too sharp for that.

Lesser men would step back. Someone more cautious would reassess, just to understand what the hell is going on… but there's a way to get the same answer, and it's way quicker.
A chunk of concrete the size of a car lifts from the rubble, emitting the characteristic red shimmer of his ability; it rotates slowly, reaching the air above his head.

"Well, ya see, whatever the fuck you are," he drawls, it'd be lazy if it weren't for the venom in his voice. "This is gonna hurt."

Chuuya throws it.

The concrete hits, and the creature screams. No, it's not pain, can it feel pain? No, it's more like surprise, like indignation. A nice clean hit won't end this: the impact has scattered the pieces, right on the wreckage, but it's not enough: it's reforming, goo slithering back towards the centre, amassing and taking shape once again.
Well, he probably just has to hit better, simple as that. It'll be a matter of hitting whilst it's reforming, with multiple projectiles.
Oh, he's got this, he's good at this. The paperwork will be a pain, but that's a problem for the future.

After the thing patches itself up into its previous, still unnerving, shape, Chuuya watches its head tilt… is it pondering? As if a decision is being made, here and now, yet with no rush. The posture is familiar, it'd be to anyone who's been in countless fights: an attack is coming.
He has to move, right the fuck now.

The air splits before Chuuya's body is ready for a dodge. A line of pure energy, flickering and vibrating with an unsettling hum, is aimed at him. No, not aimed; it took no time. There was no firing… he instinctively looks down, and there it is: he's been hit, right between his ribs. It's a beam containing a myriad of colours, crystallised in a single line, as wide as his palm, and a surprisingly tender warmth radiates from the point of contact.

Pain is going to come any minute now, no? No?!
The pain never comes, but the world itself starts dancing in a vertigo-inducing choreography that hurts his eyes. He shuts them, and one hand races to the bridge of his nose to ease the ache… but the world doesn't reappear.
It remains black.

For a second he can *almost* hear the sound of his own body hitting the ground.
Motherfucker…

Time flows weirdly when you're unconscious.
One moment, and then the next.
The next moment brings a sliver of awareness, a breath caught in his lungs, a panicked exhale.
Everything seems intact; that's something. No pain. No wounds.

Chuuya opens his eyes. The world is gigantic, when has it become so huge? Debris towers over him like a skyscraper would, the rubble is transformed into a landscape of boulders and mountains. He's in the same spot, but the size of everything is wrong.
The sky, now pitch black, seems way more unreachable than usual. It must be his vision, the attack has altered his vision: the world is sharp, the colours bleed into each other, how very unnatural.

He turns his head, trying to locate the figure: it must be still there, gloating, probably. His neck doesn't respond properly. It's not refusing, but only responding differently: joints bending at a nonsensical angle, muscles shifting in bizarre patterns.

His hat, he sees his hat. And it's *everywhere*.

The hat is intact too, at least. This thought surfaces and brings no comfort; there's way too much going on. The hat lies on him, or he's somehow inside it?! The lining is a curved wall that reaches past his shoulders. He blinks. Nothing changes: the chain, that dainty chain he has fidgeted with a thousand times, is now the size of a garden hose.

It's *his* hat, right?
Why is it the size of half of his body?
What has that motherfucker done?!

He needs to move; that's for sure. The thing might come back soon, and, for once in his life, Chuuya can admit that he's in no fit state to fight. Not like *this*, whatever this is.

But no, the hat. He can't leave it here either. This is an absurd problem.

Chuuya's body solves it without his conscious permission: his jaws close around the brim, and he's dragging it before realising what he's doing. With his mouth? Okay, alright, fuck this. He tucks it beneath a concrete overhang, leaving only a faint gleam of metal visible from certain angles.

He steps back on all fours, spine curved and weight balanced. The hat will be safe, *protected, and his*. A faint rumble spills from his breath, reverberating in his chest.
It's a purr, but that's something Chuuya will realise, retrospectively, much later.
Right now, from the inside out, it's nothing but warm satisfaction.

He starts walking, and he finally allows his gaze to race down: paws where his hands should be, paws where his feet should be. He must be hallucinating! Yeah, that's the simplest solution, hence the most probable too.

Every motion is fluid, elegant… the weightlessness is comparable to that which Chuuya can induce with his ability, but it's also less restricted. The sensation is oh-so-wrong, until it isn't: his brain rejects it, but his body has other plans. Four legs, low gravity, and an incredible sense of equilibrium granted by a flickering sensation: a tail swaying at each step.

What a fucked-up hallucination.
It's almost believable, but Chuuya doesn't fall for it, even as the landscape of rubble gives way to narrow streets and the smell of something fried replaces dust and blood.

Well, at least the fur is orange. That's a nice touch, adding to the plausibility in a manner that would make Chuuya laugh… if he had the ability to do so in this form.

Above him, thunder rumbles. It's gonna rain soon.

He needs answers, but before that he needs shelter from the incoming rain.
And he needs to not think about what he's done with the hat.
He'll figure it out, right?

His stroll leads him to a cramped street which smells of oil. Restaurants huddle together, and from their back entrances comes a call in the form of light, warmth… and the smell of fish. Chuuya's whole body turns towards the source. He doesn't want it, yet it happens.

His body sits.
For those accustomed to the ways of cats, he is, albeit unbeknownst to himself, *begging.*
Paws tucked, staring at the door, wide and attentive blue eyes tracking every shadow eclipsing the light.
He's waiting for someone to bring him something. Grilled fish, hopefully.
What the hell is he doing?

Then, the first drop hits his nose.

The second lands on his ear, tickling. Within the span of a breath the sky has opened and rain pours down. It soaks him rather quickly, reaching the skin as he scrambles for cover. Chuuya ducks beneath a rusted awning, shaking droplets from his coat by moving his whole body.

Nearby, tucked in the corner, a puddle is already forming: it captures the shimmering multicolour lights of multiple shop signs. Chuuya strides over; he looks at it expecting nothing; well, no, maybe his own face, even if he doubts that's what he'll see.

Of course what he sees is a cat.
And not a majestic one at that.

He is small, orange and wet. The fur is plastered flat, which makes him look even tinier: a street rat would have more dignity; he looks pathetic… a pathetic cat. Framed by the copper fur are big blue eyes, narrowed in an expression of pure fury. Ears flattened, tail puffed with indignation, teeth gritted… no, fuck this.
Chuuya looks away.
He turns his head slightly over his shoulder, looking back.
The cat does the same.
No, nope, fuck no.

He opens his mouth: 'Fuck!' is what he planned on saying. Swearing always makes the world feel manageable. It helps, in any and every situation… what comes out is a mere sound. No, there's no word, only a thin and shaky *mrrp* that makes it finally dawn on him.

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Tiny, soaking wet. His hat is safe, but God knows where his wallet is. He cannot speak, he cannot call for reinforcements. He is powerless.
And to make matters worse it's raining ca–ah ah, very funny, fuck off.

The rain hammers down, relentless, ricochetting against the roofs in an imperfect melody and turning the street into a river of reflected neon.

His paws ache with cold and his whiskers are dripping. There's not much one can do without opposable thumbs. Chuuya's body, this strange shape he's been trapped in, knows what to do, though. It's not purposeful, it won't solve shit, but his legs fold beneath him and his tail curls around, settling as it touches his front legs.

A perfect circle of wet fur. He's making himself small, as if he's not small enough. Unbidden, his chin drops to his paws. He's hiding, but not from the passersby: Chuuya, for the first time in his life, is hiding from the situation.

Time passes, that’s something he can acknowledge even if his perception is, currently, warped.

His mind drifts: his apartment, his wine, his bed would be so warm and perfect right now; oh, the cigarette he’s been craving since before the fight…
How long until the Port Mafia notices he’s gone? It’ll take the whole night, minimum. And how long after that before they find a cat where an executive should be?

Anger is a weird thing at this instant. For what little he knows about cats, he should be hissing and growling. He doesn’t. He curls tighter, pressing his spine against the wall and allowing his eyelids to slide shut.

Rather than anger, this tiny body is translating a more complex thing: the inability of seeing a way out would have been channelled into fury, in normal circumstances. Fury is good, it allows one to break things, and if you break enough shit you can eventually find an opening. The result is objectively useless: helplessness becomes exhaustion.

Perhaps it’s just the cold, which makes him shiver every three breaths.

No, he’s not sleeping. It’s a quick rest. Just a moment, one when he doesn’t have to fight.

Yokohama continues to breathe, as it always does, even as the rain falls in silver sheets. Over a couple of hours, the rainstorm has softened, blurring the edges of the city, adorning it with small rivers that flow towards the drains.
Of course, aided by the late hour, the rain drives people home, a shepherd herding a flock of office workers.

Umbrellas bob past in clusters, their owners hunched against the wind, pulling their scarves tighter, holding onto their bags and bumping into each other. The rain makes people forget how to walk; that’s a universal rule, apparently.

One figure, surprisingly, seems in no rush at all.
When does he ever? He strides lazily, does he even have a destination? Perhaps destinations are, like many other things, a privilege reserved for human beings, which is a status he’d never grant himself.
His umbrella is battered, with a couple of spokes bent at odd angles. Near the centre there’s a visible hole which allows rain to drip, steadily and annoyingly, onto the top of his brown waves. He’s been walking long enough that the dripping has now soaked the back of his collar: the beige trench coat has many darkening spots, but that growing circle at the back of his neck is the most annoying of them all.

The detective turns the corner, passing the awning without pause. Then stops.
He takes three steps backward. Looks down.

Orange is such a vibrant colour, you see… well, Osamu Dazai might have a slight priming towards it, for reasons that we shall not investigate at this instant.

A small circle of copper, sheltered by the awning, lying still. A cat. Oh, he's always been a cat person, despite not all cats liking him. Perhaps that's the reason, if one ignores the uneasiness that dogs instil into him: cats are selective, they see differences between individuals. Cats, unlike dogs, are not polite about it, either. Cats, unlike dogs, don't need proximity to judge you: they do it automatically, even from afar, and bless you with their proximity only if you pass their evaluation.

Dazai crouches slowly, so as not to startle the sleeping cat. He tilts the umbrella in a way that covers the entrance of that minuscule shelter more than his own head. The rain starts darkening the back of his coat, and its hem is drinking from the puddle on the ground.

Close up, he can see the shivering running through that compact body every few seconds. The man extends one hand, fingers hovering without touching… he knows better and he acts as such; a novelty for Osamu Dazai. He always knows better, but he rarely acts accordingly.

"Oh my," he murmurs in a voice that is surprisingly devoid of artifice: it's just soft, it is, with no deliberation. Apparently, cats don't belong to the collection of individuals that humans call society, cats aren't part of the public witnessing the spectacle that this detective is. "Not doing so well, are you?"

His fingertips finally make contact with the cat's side: underneath the wet fur, breaths come fast and shallow. The cat is alive, but what a timid way of living it is.

Chuuya wakes up miffed. This is not unprecedented, unfortunately.
What he can discern, bit by bit, is that he's cold, very wet, and there's something warm and unbidden pressing against his side.His eyes fly open, and for one very disorientated second he doesn't understand what he's seeing.

A face hovers above him, gigantic and half-shadowed by an umbrella.

No. No, of course not, the universe ain't such a bitch, is she?

Recognition precedes comprehension, and his body rushes before his mind fully catches up. He bolts.

Well, he tries to. His paws slip on the wet ground and all he manages are three stumbling steps to the side before leaning against the brick wall.
No way out, but his frame doesn't accept defeat: his fur bristles, and, whilst arching his spine, he tries to curse the bastard in front of him.
A hiss tears from his throat, instead of the colourful curses that he's hurling within his skull.

Dazai Osamu is the man crouched in front of him. Of all the people in Yokohama, of all the nightmares, it has to be the worst one.

"Easy," Dazai chides, and his hand stays there, stationary and unthreatening. Rain is dripping onto his *oh-so-perfect* hair. And he's not even complaining about it!

Chuuya's tail puffs to twice its size, and his lips pull back, baring small sharp teeth that he still hasn't accepted as his. His own anger is being translated into pure feline fury. A *"Grrph"* comes out, and it's meant to be a threat, but it's shaky.

One of Dazai's eyebrows rises, and his eyes are still unbelievably tender. Chuuya would love to claw them out, at this instant, but he doubts he can reach him. Hilarious, truly fucking so. For all the taunts of their youth, for all the *'You sure you can reach that high, slug?'*, now it's undeniable: he cannot reach, even if he jumped.

"What about we make a deal?" Dazai adds after a breath of calculation. "I'll dry you off, and afterwards you can decide whether you like me or not."

Fuck no, stay away from me. Don't you fucking dare touch me. I'll bite, yes, I'll…

"Many don't, so I won't be disappointed, I promise," Dazai adds, as if it could make his offer more palatable.

The feline's ears relax a shade, still flattened but less severely. First of all, why is the idiot trying to persuade a cat with words? Of course this one is perceptive, he is not a cat, he's just a very unlucky Port Mafia Executive experiencing one of the worst days of his life.
So, does Dazai talk to all cats like this? *Pff…*
What answer is he even waiting for? It's clear he's waiting, sheltering the cat from the rain and acting as if he has all night just to convince him to follow.

No way in hell he's going with Dazai.
He'll stay here, in the rain; he'll probably contract some sort of feline illness and die tragically in a puddle next to a ramen shop. That's a good alternative: death has dignity! And it doesn't involve being treated as a pet by someone who'd be delighted by the irony of this shitty moment.

Chuuya glares, and it takes a lot of stubbornness to try to convey a human emotion with a snout.
It's clearly not sufficient to get the message across, because Dazai doesn't move.

At least Dazai doesn't know.

A minute passes, or perhaps more. Time flows differently in this form: it feels like an eternity, but it can't be. Chuuya knows for a fact, that despite all the strategising, the man in front of him is not patient. Patience requires a certain balance, within his own mind and with the world as a whole, and Dazai has neither.

Yet time passes.
The silence is imperfect and the rain falls.
And Chuuya's limbs begin to tremble, a giveaway of pure exhaustion. It's the cold, it's the humiliating reality of his shelter, of lying on wet concrete for hours… and within a form that has no resilience.

He sways, and there's nothing Chuuya can do to stop it. Such an instability, albeit brief, should eventuate in face-planting the concrete… but it doesn't happen: Dazai moves.

He’s fast when he wants to be; that’s something Chuuya’s instinctually known for years.

One hand slides beneath the cat’s chest, cupping that minuscule trembling shape. Wait, fuck… no. He’s being lifted off the ground and pressed against a warm, dry chest.
The lapel of a beige trenchcoat follows soon after, enveloping his whole body and leaving only his head peeking from it.
Chuuya is shocked and freezing… or perhaps he’s just too weak to do anything more than let his head loll against the warmth. The fucking problem is that it’s snug and dry, and he hasn’t felt anything dry in something akin to a lifetime. Time is weird, for cats.

“Shh,” Dazai coos. “You barely weigh anything at all, do you? You *little thing*, all fur and fury.” The words are melodious in nature, comparable to a gentle and, supposedly, soothing hum… fuck, it is. It has the same effect of an off-key lullaby: it’s atrocious music, but it bestows comfort regardless.

Chuuya wants to scream and unleash every foul curse he knows, or at least protest with *‘I’ll have you know I’m a **medium-sized cat**!’*
Something comes out, but it’s the most high-pitched mew ever voiced. Fucking fantastic, now the bastard has yet another reason to pity him!

Dazai doesn’t answer; what can you say to a squeak? His brown eyes widen in response, but it’s ephemeral. As his gaze softens, the skin at the corners of his eyes settles into a few faint creases; it’s the kind one earns at twenty-two, not a day younger.

Chuuya fights.
No, that’s not accurate; he tries to fight.

He will not be carried like a pet; he’s not a helpless creature, and he shouldn’t be grateful. Despite his current form he still has weapons: sharp claws that could tear through bandages and flesh, needle-sharp teeth made to taste blood. Yes, then Dazai will drop him and then… well, he’ll figure out the rest. He’s good at that.

He tries to act on it, truly, but the rage is unreachable, somewhere at the edges of his thoughts but inaccessible to his muscles. No, it’s worse, his body is simply not listening: the focus is elsewhere.

The tension has left his body, and in its absence Chuuya can now recognise that he’s been clenched for hours, even when unconscious. His spine relaxes without his permission, his head settles against the fabric and his ears twitch once before settling. Even his legs have stopped trembling; they tuck closer: he is, effectively, a ball of ginger fur.

No, I’m not going to…

The anger fades. And all the intentions feeding on it do the same.
His eyelids are heavy, and even the rain has changed: it’s muffled, distant, kind. It’s the comfort a human gets from staying home on a rainy day: sure, the outside is wet and harsh, but there’s nothing to worry about, not here, because here there is warmth.

I hate this, I hate you so fucking much.

Okay, he should track the route, at least. He's being taken, he has to count the turns. That's something simple; he can manage it, even if Chuuya has to pour an enormous amount of willpower into the simple act of keeping his eyes open.

The streetlights blur past in orange smears that, every once in a while, intrude underneath that raggedy umbrella. *Two right, one left… is there any landmark in sight?*

Something glimmers.

His gaze fixates on it in a split second. *No, fuck, the turns, that's not…*
It's a bolo tie, resting at the hollow of Dazai's throat and swaying with every step. Back and forth, back and forth… and more importantly, beneath it there are two tails of leather cord, dangling against his chest; they're remarkably close to Chuuya's head.

The tails end in ornate metal tips which catch and release the light in a hypnotic rhythm that makes Chuuya's pupils dilate.
Don't.
His paw lifts.
Don't you fucking dare.

The pad of his front leg connects to the cord in a split second, sending it swinging in the opposite direction.
Oh.
He bats again, slowly, watching it go away and come back for more. It's just so fucking satisfying, okay?! It's primitive, it's a makeshift hunt with a very willing and shiny prey, and he just can't stop doing it.

From above, Dazai makes a sound: it's feeble but dripping with delight. "Cute, I'm flattered."

No, it's not cute, *you piece of shit.* Yet his paw swats one more time and it completely misses the mark, landing on the fabric of Dazai's shirt and giving up. Yeah, he'll go back to hunting the shiny thing later, because that's a very important thing that he needs to do.
And the turns? Where is he now?

His eyes close. No answer surfaces and his awareness dissipates.
The mind cannot hold onto fear when the body has already surrendered.

It's the absence of the rain that brings him back to consciousness. In a matter of hours the coldness and wetness have seeped through his bones, becoming permanent. It's almost impossible to remember a moment when he hasn't been so, which is ridiculous. Rationally, Chuuya knows that is ridiculous.

There's warmth, not localised but permeating, and it's everywhere.
Alongside it there's a motion, a touch… of something soft and dry, rubbing against his back in circles. *Eh?!*

Chuuya blinks, and he tries to lift his head but it's not cooperative… it's so heavy, way too heavy for his neck. He still manages a glimpse of his surroundings: he has been set on a sofa, or at least something that pretends to be, and the room is yellow.
Yes, yellow, an important feature to identify where he has been moved, sure thing, *good fucking job, Nakahara.*

He has been moved, and he doesn't know where he is. It's a small room, filled with accumulated belongings and the yellow… old light bulbs! *What a cheap bastard.*

Dazai is the source of that insistent rubbing: towel in hand, he's trying to dry the fur around the cat's shoulders in gentle circular motions.
What? Why?!
Chuuya tries to ask, but what comes out is a high-pitched and questioning chirp.

Of course, like every other person since the dawn of time, Dazai interprets that sound as an attempt to communicate.
It's even more unsurprising that the sound gets filtered and distorted, becoming something different.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm not good at this I know," a brief pause. "But you've stopped shivering, which is good."

It's a completely incongruous response, a monologue masquerading as a conversation. Perhaps human projecting onto animals is what makes them adorable.

Yeah, it's a fair fucking point. You know what else it is? For a mafioso trapped in a cat's body? *Infuriating.*

Osamu Dazai, of all people, is supposed to be smart. Where's his intelligence now? Why can't he see that the blue eyes staring up at him are familiar, and that those eyes, despite the variations, are human eyes?

Dazai's fingers work their way from Chuuya's shoulders to his legs with surprising delicacy, and they purposefully try to keep his bare hands away from the cat's claws. Albeit retracted, they're still present, a potential source of pain if Dazai isn't careful enough.

"You know, I had other plans for tonight," he says, and anyone who knows the bastard well enough can easily guess. "But then I saw something small, angry and orange that needed rescuing… so I guess not today, I suppose."

He's not trying to make any sense, that much is clear: Dazai's talking to himself, so there's no need to clarify anything at all.

The problem is that Chuuya knows enough. He doesn't need additions to understand the implications: he's, against his own will, fluent in the bastard's unique language. So, what does he mean? Simple: *'I wanted to kill myself tonight, again, but then I saw you and you changed my plans.'*

What a heavy revelation to lay on anyone: if this is the only honesty he's capable of, it's understandable why the bastard rarely indulges in it. This is not clean; this is not polite; nobody wants to know this.
The cat doesn't care, or rather, this cat cannot understand, no? So the heavy weight of those words cannot crush its bones. Here it is, the pathway that leads to this man's honesty: the certainty, which is an unfortunate illusion in this case, that he can unveil himself without inflicting harm.

Dazai stills, resting on the dishevelled fur, just for a second. It's pleasant; that's something Chuuya cannot deny: those are big hands, enhanced by the size of Chuuya's own body, and they're gifting him some warmth.

The contact fades gently as Dazai reaches for something on the couch beside them. Oh, it's a blanket: thin and grey, but it's clean. He wraps it around Chuuya's body with surprising care, tucking the edges until only his head remains free.

It's constrictive. Chuuya should flee, but the bundling is soft and warm and his body instinctively curls into it.

"Very dignified, ne?" He's teasing, clearly, but it's gentle. How strange.

"I'm going to find you something to eat," Dazai announces, straightening up. "I must have something edible. Don't go anywhere."

Where the fuck would I go? I'm wrapped in a blanket, you dip shit.

At this point Chuuya's mind has relented in its futile fight: there's a lot he should be thinking about, but right now it doesn't matter. He should find a way to reverse the transformation. He should be running towards the headquarters. He should…
But, peering from the window, one can see that the rain has picked back up, and Chuuya is now… his legs are short and the headquarters is impossibly far…
He's never been the type to accept comfort: he's lived on the streets for most of his childhood. He knows survival.

Tonight he doesn't have the strength to trade comfort in favour of survival, though.

The warmth is all-encompassing, spreading outwardly and reaching the tops of his ears. For a single eternal moment, he drifts in the space between awareness and a dream: yes, he has a tail, he is a cat, he is trapped… but it's not such a big deal, is it?
How could it be?
Nothing hurts and there's nothing Chuuya can do: he is caged in this frame, which is hilariously liberating.

Somewhere a cabinet opens.
Light footsteps on a wooden floor.

The scent of crab rounds the corner and reaches him: it's the most intense smell he's ever experienced, full of layers, a salty ode to the sea. His stomach clenches and his small pink nose twitches.

The bandaged bastard appears in his field of vision, but that delicious smell dominates each and every other sense. Dazai holds a sauce dish in one hand and a ceramic bottle in the other. “I caught you something,” he declares, one of those tender lies that are unavoidable when talking to something cute, settling the plate within reach.

After loosening the edges of the blanket, Dazai settles on the floor in front of the couch, sprawling with his back against the border. The deliberate implication is clear: ‘I’m not looking, I’m not interested in stealing the food I’ve provided, eat now’. To support it Dazai takes a long pull from the bottle, his eyes unfocused, gazing at the dusty window, as if reaching for the outside world.

So many questions demand to be asked, but Chuuya has no voice and, admittedly, he’s staring at the food, reluctantly.
This is pity, which he’s always hated. He should refuse this. It’s canned crab; of course it is… it’ll taste like shit.

His stomach is working with the input coming from his nose: it growls, audibly. *Fuck.*

Dazai laughs, and it’s a very new sound: it conveys no mockery. It’s spilling out with no real control and intention.

You know what? Fine, this is fucking fine.

Chuuya extricates his front paws from the blanket before diving in: his whole face enters the dish, and for a moment his whole world is encased by the ceramic and its contents.
With the first bite his pride dies.
Oh, are you shitting my dick?
This canned crab is the most extraordinary thing Chuuya’s ever tasted. The flavour is not inherent in the crab itself, of course: the richness is circumstantial.

He eats with horrifying intensity, in frantic bites devoid of any restraint.

Amongst the bites something else can be heard: his small body is vibrating, and it’s too late to stop it… no, no, he is purring. Over canned crab, of all things, and in front of…

Dazai turns his head, just to peer over his shoulder, as if he doesn’t dare to intrude upon the moment, as if he’s granting the cat privacy. His eyes are relaxed and slightly narrowed, and one corner of his mouth stretches into half-a-smile.
It’s satisfaction for a mere action: he’s done something useful, feeding a stray. This moment cannot be a charade, because there is no public. Sincerity can flourish only without prying eyes, that’s something the detective oftentimes experiences, but usually his honesty bears despair. Today it’s yielding pride.

Osamu Dazai has done something right.
Even when his eyes return to the window, and the sake bottle returns to his lips, the smile doesn’t fade.

Behind him, the small orange stray licks the dish clean with a fervour akin to devotion.
Yeah, fuck, Chuuya’ll deal with the shame tomorrow.

The dish is empty, and Chuuya stares at it for a moment, as if he's waiting for more to appear. He is sated, but a bit more wouldn't hurt… what a very feline thought that is.

"Done?"

Dazai's hand reaches for the dish, just to set it down on the low table in front of the couch: yes, if it's in sight it means it might be refilled, sooner or later. Chuuya tenses as the plate is lifted, but he relaxes the moment it lands: if it's still in sight there's a chance it'll be refilled again.

The hand returns, hovering above Chuuya's head for a moment. There's hesitancy in those elongated fingers, and that's something nobody would ever think possible: Dazai's hands always seem so certain in their laziness, and yet, now they're trembling.

Gently, the touch lands between the cat's ears, resting on the fur without pressure. Is he waiting to see if the cat will allow it?

Ridiculous piece of shit.
There's an important consideration to be made, a relevant question to be asked: why hasn't he been turned back by *No Longer Human*? Is this furry body permanent? No, it's… oh, this is not an ability. At least Chuuya's been spared the embarrassment of suddenly materialising on the bastard's couch.
This makes the prospect of reversing the transformation way harder, but… the warmth of the contact spreads through his skull, tiptoeing down his spine and reigniting the purring.

Fuck it; Chuuya's head tilts into the touch, demanding more.

"Oh," Dazai exhales. "Okay." His voice is shaking, as if some emotion is daring to spill but it's still being contained.

His fingers curl, stroking behind his ears, lingering where the ginger fur is the softest. The vibration explodes: it's loud, it's insistent and it silences Chuuya's thoughts. Yeah, it's all right.

A purring cat is the most comforting thing in the world, or so Dazai would say: it's honest, it's an undeniable reaction… life would be easier if humans conveyed likes and dislikes the same way cats do. There would be no need to deceive.

"You know, perhaps introductions are in order," he says, and there's some theatricality in his tone, a flicker of a dying performance.

"Cats tend to be self-centred, I respect that." His voice pauses, but his fingers keep tracing lazy patterns through ginger fur. "Your saviour's name is Dazai Osamu, the most beloved member of the Armed Detective Agency!"

Oh, so now that's how you introduce yourself… how very convenient. It's a dishonest introduction, crystallised in the present and ignorant of the past. It's a move Chuuya should

have expected, but it still gets on his nerves.

“You see, it sounds more impressive than it is. Mostly we solve those cases the police can’t handle, and we step in when abilities are involved… a good chunk of the job is infidelity and lost pets, though,” he elaborates, because that was a problem, obviously. The cat needed to know this.

Serves you well, now you can shove your self-importance up your arse before stalking a cheating salary-man.

“Are you a lost pet? Would you even know? Perhaps you see yourself as a street urchin, because you forgot, but actually you’re precious to someone and you just… don’t remember.” The hypothetical is unnecessary, but it’s hilariously fitting.

Why don’t you shut the fuck up? Chuuya would genuinely want to convey that, but Dazai’s thumb finds that spot behind his ear, and the rumble intensifies. He doesn’t even try.

Yes, in a way he used to be a street urchin who had forgotten how important he was, but rather than a sign of recognition this is nothing but a coincidence.
The universe, as we’ve agreed upon earlier, is a bitch.

“I work with good people,” he adds, his gaze darts upwards. “They care about me, which is inconvenient. It hasn’t always been so… the detective thing is a new development.”

“It’s not like the people I worked with before the ADA were bad… no, let me be precise, not all of them were bad.” The words come out slow, deliberate. “There were different parameters for care, I guess. Honour as a moral code does these weird things, it makes regular things shameful… and somehow atrocity becomes a virtue. I don’t know how to explain it, I guess you had to be there.”

“I fret they don’t hire cats, though,” Dazai hums in a snort, trying to shatter the tension he, himself, has inadvertently forged. “Though the ADA does… not officially, but Fukuzawa-san has a bias towards your kind, we could easily convince him.”

This is a predictable pivot, Chuuya knows him well enough: the bastard is allergic to responsibility, and even something as small as this orange cat is too much for him. He’s already looking for a better alternative: people who don’t plan on staying always do this, and they always reach this type of conclusion.
The best alternative, the best outcome, it’s always the one where they’re not involved.

You’re still the same shitty coward…

Perhaps it’s a good thing that, in this form, Chuuya’s impulsive reactions cannot take form: he’s not processing them properly, he never does when this bastard is around.
Now, right now, Chuuya can just listen and purr.
The immediate frustration, which rears its head after each and every word Dazai utters, is slowly starting to fade.

“And that’s all!” Dazai chirps, feigning unnecessary glee, but he intensifies his ministrations.

Oh, yes, scratch there, you piece of shit.

Chuuya's body conveys the demand by tilting, granting privileged access to his neck: every touch sends tingles down his spine, and the wave comes back through his lungs in the form of an insistent vibration. The purring has grown louder, all-encompassing, Chuuya hears it reverberate in his skull.
Each and every sensation feeds on the previous one and nourishes its successor. It's like being shitfaced, in a way, but with no alcohol involved and way less dread.

"You're very calm, you know that?" He observes as his fingers dive under the blanket, tracing the ridge of Chuuya's spine. Street cats usually scratch, or bolt, or both, so this orange ball of fur is clearly not feral. It's tolerating the blanket, the feeding, the scratches.

"You must have had an owner, someone who taught you to trust. They must have put up posters, no? 'Lost orange cat, angry and fluffy'." The words are gentle, reassuring even. Cats don't understand words, but they can easily grasp tones, and which one would be more comforting than the one conveying 'you'll be found, you'll be back home soon'?

"That's what happens when something cherished disappears, they don't celebrate the absence."

It takes Chuuya an embarrassing amount of seconds to make the connection, and it's moderately aided by the loss of stimulation.

Dazai has stopped talking about the cat, he himself is the thing that disappeared… oh. Okay. It's very on brand for the bastard, turning himself into a victim when he was the one who, four years earlier, did the disappearing to begin with. The Port Mafia doesn't put up posters for traitors.
The lack of a proper hunt was, in itself, mercy!
Yet, when he looks up, Dazai's lips are so thin, closed shut as if to cage a feeling inside, and his eyes are surprisingly wet. As if Dazai has the ability to cry, like every other human being… *so fucking ridiculous.*

But there's no public. This isn't a performance either, and it's an uncomfortable peek into the inner workings of Dazai's mind: of course his absence must have been celebrated, no?

You stupid suicidal sack of shit, distorting reality through.…

Chuuya cannot shout, he cannot…
Well, he can do something, at least.
He shifts his small body, wriggling until he can turn his head: he presses his small skull against the centre of Dazai's palm. Insistent, hard, for a couple of seconds, and then he turns to the side. His cheek and whiskers start rubbing against the skin, one side, then the other, again and again. *Stupid Mackerel.*

"Oh, okay, yeah, I'll get you home, I promise."

No, that’s not it! Idiot! The cat keeps rubbing, keeps pressing, and purring morphs into a roar: for a second one can hear the disconcerting mixture of pleasure and outrage.

Dazai doesn’t grasp it, and even if he did it’d be perilous, even for a genius, to jump from concept to concept to reach the correct conclusion. It’d be something like this, if you’re wondering: the cat is mad about my words because the cat knows what happened, the cat knows my tendencies, and he’s now trying to console me. You see? It sounds like the onset of a very bad joke.

Dazai stands, and Chuuya’s world tilts: he has no clue when the bastard’s hand has slithered under his body, and yet here it is, airborne for a very disorientating couple of seconds.
They’re both moving. The couch dips under Dazai’s weight as he lies down, and the orange cat finds himself relocated, deposited onto a warm sternum.

“There, ain’t this better?”

His hand resumes its strokes, though it’s slower, lazier. Now, of all the things that Chuuya’s experienced today, this one takes the crown. Dazai’s face is so impossibly close, enough to grasp the slight variations of the man’s irises: coffee with a dusting of gold. He’s never noticed that…

Wherever that realisation is going, it doesn’t, it stops before its destination. This body has clearly stopped asking for permission, as if the extended purring has an intoxicating effect, dulling his thoughts and his inhibitions.
His paws press into the warmth, kneading at the cotton with leisure. Press, release. Like he’s making bread from invisible dough.
Fuck, no. It feels amazing though.

“Oh my god, you’re making biscuits!” Never has genuine wonder tilted Dazai Osamu’s voice like it does now. Of all things in Yokohama it is this that gets to him: a tiny creature which has no reason to trust the world, nor him, who’s communicating that, in this brief moment, he is safe.

“Good cat,” he whispers, right before his eyes close.
For once in forever, Dazai’s breathing slows down without putting up a fight, escaping slightly curved lips.

Sleep and Osamu have never been good acquaintances, that’s something even Chuuya knows.
He can’t recall when the notion entered his mind, but it resurfaces right now.
It’s important: relevance and scarcity go hand in hand, don’t they?

He could say he doesn’t give a flying fuck, and that’s a performance he might resume later, but for now he allows himself the satisfaction. Dazai’s face is slack, his eyes close and shed long shadows on his cheekbones; he’s vulnerable and unaware of the claws catching in the fabric of his shirt.

A cat can be deadly, it takes a single well-placed slash to end a man.

One of Chuuya's paws reaches upwards.

No, he's not going for the jugular, you ill-intentioned reader: there's the gemstone, now static, but also unguarded. Perfect prey: *it's finally mine*. Chuuya shifts his weight forward: this is another satisfying victory for this orange cat, and he celebrates by tucking his snout under the collar's fold.

Safe, accomplished, victorious.
Warm, proud, fed.
Such a strange mix; it's a concoction of complex human emotions and simpler, feline, ones.
The remaining paw stubbornly continues kneading, but the rhythm stutters, pressing with diminishing force.

He should really try fixing this mess. Fleeing from a window, at least. He should figure it all out, *it's time to leave…*

His paw presses once more, and then stills. Even the vibration in his throat fades to a whisper, and then succumbs to silence.

A sleeping detective with a small and warm weight at the centre of his chest, in a flat reeking of cheap sake and canned crab: real peace, in its ephemeral and realistic manifestation, frequently looks just like this.
At times heaven is just an orange cat.

Ow. What the hell.
There's pain in his neck, that's the notion that wakes Chuuya up, rather than the more dignified alternative of being woken up by the morning light. His face is pressed against something warm, one arm is stretched outward, fingers curled around something cool and smooth.
His other arm is numb and trapped under his own body.

Mm. Nice.

There's no immediate rush to go, to run, to get his day started just to start slaving away to his own obligations. No, this is safe and comfortable: both adjectives that Chuuya never granted to his own bed.
Absentmindedly, his thumb traces the object in his grasp, tracing a couple of circles on the gemstone. Thumb?

His eyes snap open: white fabric littered with thin blue lines, the ridges of buttons, a collar, and right there, directly in his line of sight, lies the blue gemstone, set in brass wire and possessively held by a very human hand.

The situation is… compromising, that's the first thought: his leg is thrown over a thigh, his body is draped across another man's like an admittedly short blanket, and…
He's naked.
He's human, and he is very naked.
He's human, naked, and lying on Dazai.

Of fucking course, his clothes are where his hat is. Is it how the transformation is supposed to go? Or does the universe just hate him, specifically?
It's clear he needs to move.
Now, before this gets worse.
Even if, what could be worse than being naked on a traitor's chest? What could possibly…
Dazai waking up and seeing him, that's it, that's the worst case scenario.

His limbs protest as he shifts, but despite the numbness Chuuya manages to slide off the couch without making a sound. Every moment is costly, like the immense effort one needs to leave a warm bed on a freezing winter morning.

Dazai's breath stutters, once. Only once before steadying back. It's alright, the bastard is still sleeping.
Now the problem is, where to go? How to leave? Sure, he could stride out from the front door, if not for a single detail… he's naked.

Nakahara Chuuya, Executive of Mori Corp, seen fleeing naked from the apartment of Osamu Dazai, employee of the Armed Detective Agency.
The headlines write themselves.

Alright, fuck. He circles the room with feather-like steps. There's a wardrobe in the corner, and that's his best chance to locate something that will cover enough for him to get from here to the headquarters without being arrested for public indecency. He's not going to be arrested on such charges, it'd be insulting to every other crime he has committed in the past fifteen years. *Unacceptable.*

He faces the wardrobe's absolute chaos: shirts crumpled in creative shapes barely reminiscent of a fold, trousers hanging from one leg, and a single tie knotted around the hanger for… what even is the purpose of that? *Ah! Not very strategic of you, Osamu.* The thought almost makes him snort, but he catches himself before that.

Chuuya tears through the piles at the bottom with the focus of a man who has thirty seconds (well, a minute at best) before the universe finds another way to humiliate him.
He immediately pulls on a beige sweater: worn thin by use and gigantic on his frame. It almost fits on the shoulders, but the sleeves are a disaster. Next, sweatpants! They're brown and pool at his ankles, but he cinches them as tight as it can go and he rolls up the hem thrice. How dare Dazai have clothes that fit his height!

Chuuya pauses at the door. He should be fleeing as fast as possible, yet he looks back once. Just once.
Dazai is still on the couch, sleeping, a hand lying on his sternum as if trying to hold onto something that isn't there anymore. He doesn't look serene, no, that's not in the realm of possibilities, but he looks defenceless. Even soulless bastards are affected by sleep, Chuuya's not surprised, and there's absolutely no ache in his chest either. Not at all.
The bolo tie is still there, and there's something inviting in the way it glints in the thin morning light. He's already stolen clothes, adding that too…
Don't fucking think about it.

The door opens silently; the hallway stretches ahead, empty and safe. He closes the door with care and with the faintest click known to man. Luck might be on his side this morning.
But no, there's a movement in his peripheral vision: a door opening at the end of the corridor.

Lesser men would freeze, Chuuya glows red, instead, floating upwards in the blink of an eye. Gravity is nothing but a suggestion: he flattens himself against the ceiling like a spider in stolen clothes.

Shit.

A tall blond man emerges, already dressed despite the time, notebook in hand. Oh, right, he's an ADA member… named… *four-eyes, or something. A very regular Japanese name, not that it matters to Chuuya's inner categories.*

The man walks in the opposite direction, muttering to himself something that sounds suspiciously like Dazai's name, followed by a complaint.

He passes directly under Chuuya. He doesn't look up. Nobody ever looks up.

The footsteps fade. Chuuya hits the floor in a silent crouch and sprints in the opposite direction. Down the hallway, through the stairwell, until the cold morning air envelops him.

Chuuya doesn't stop running until he's two blocks away, all whilst trying very hard not to think about anything at all.

Dazai wakes much later; his chest is weirdly empty. Lighter, for sure, but there's no relief. There's only confusion and loss of a specific steady heat that has pressed against his torso all night.

His hand moves, searching, but he only finds wrinkled fabric and his own bolo-tie, which has come loose during the night.

"Hey?" Even his voice is questioning, but no response comes.

He gets up without much of a fuss, which is unusual, just to start looking for the loss. He checks the bathroom first. Under the couch. Behind the bookshelf. Then within the kitchen's floor cabinets. There's no rationality behind it, no pondering how the cat could have got inside, no, there's just the increasing desperation of losing something important.

"Kitty?" Dazai inquires, but his voice is thin, as it often happens when hope fades out.

He doesn't even know what he'd hoped for to begin with. No, he knows.

It could have been a reason.
A reason that makes tomorrow worth reaching for.
It could have been good, coming home to something alive. He'd be forced to buy groceries, because the cat needed food, so that would have improved his own diet a bit.
It would have been nice, to have something to fall asleep to, every night. A weight on his

chest, tampering with the void that rested in his ribcage.
It could have been good, having something choose to stay, just because.
Perhaps, thus, Dazai could have done the same.
It could have been enough.

He doesn’t know if he’d be good at it, but he would have tried taking care of it. It could have helped, having something sincere in his life.

The cat is gone, this is pointless.
Perhaps they’ll cross paths again, cats are resilient creatures after all, free and ungrateful.

The coffee pot is empty.
He’ll make some coffee, that’s it.

Despite his brain, as awful and wonderful as it is, Dazai will never know what happened, who was there, who purred against his will.
And perhaps that’s for the best.

On the other side of the city, there’s a ginger mafioso buying canned crab and trying very hard not to inspect why.

We all delude ourselves with the illusion of knowing what the shape of our grief is. We don’t know. Its borders are fuzzy, as if someone dug into a ribcage with a rusty spoon: we can feel the pain, the edges, and we rationalise it, we visualise a shape that isn’t there.
Such a level of detail is not bestowed upon human beings.
You see those two, right?

One is making coffee and he deems his grief cat-shaped.
The other is shopping for an exact shape, that of a can of crab.
Neither can see that this is an old loss, four years in the making, and shaped exactly like each other.

Chapter 2: Dawn unspins what dusk has done.

Chapter Summary

> One doesn't simply forget being a cat; Chuuya struggles with it. Only you (the reader), and I properly know what went down the day before, but not for long.

Chapter Notes

> ᓚ Hello there, thank you for tuning back in on this premise of mine, I hope that this chapter will be enjoyable!
> On a personal note, I've found myself subconsciously posting chapters or works just a couple of days before having to face an exam, this is starting to become a pattern. It's not deliberate, I swear, but I don't mind it. This specific chapter has been written in small increments over the span of 15 days, with 3 additional days for editing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coffee is more of an obligation than a pleasure, or at least that’s what Dazai would tell you. Breakfast is a concept rooted in dignity and diligence, an attempt to prepare to face the demands of the coming day. It’s, by definition, an act of self-care.
His coffee is not part of it; it’s terrible, coating his tongue in a bitter film. How unsurprising; good coffee requires either money or patience, and he possesses neither. Regardless, he sips it.
A warm punch; it’s something that negotiates with one’s drowsiness, both mean and kind.

The flat is a mess, a bit more than usual, but now there is the addition of a small plate on the floor, in front of the couch. It stays in Dazai’s field of view for a couple of sips. The bare minimum would be picking it up and setting it down in the sink, maybe even giving it a rinse. Yeah, not even the full task of doing the dishes.
He doesn’t move, though; he’s leaning against the kitchen counter, rooted in place.
He should pick it up.
It’d be wise.
Eventually he will. Just not right now.

He forces his gaze away from the plate, redirecting it to the window. The rain stopped hours ago, but its ghost still haunts the glass with droplets of water. It’s an epilogue like any other, an impermanent announcement of something that has been, and soon won’t be anymore. Rain comes back, sooner or later. What about cats, though?

Now, this is not a regular train of thought, we can all agree on that. He's implicitly trying not to think about a tiny ball of orange fur, and yet through the view of a wet window, with the aid of a couple of flights of fancy he goes right back.
This is a bad habit of his, a tendency to press on a bruise again and again, even when he doesn't want to. Especially when he doesn't want to.

The cat is *gone.*
Dazai checked twice, frantically, all in vain. The windows are closed. The door is closed. There's nothing else he can do, so letting go would be the most rational choice.

Dazai takes another, slower, sip, letting the bitterness linger on his tongue.
He cannot let it go. Because… it doesn't make sense. Pride factors in, admittedly: he's always been good at things that don't make sense! He is a detective now!
Whilst cats are notoriously elusive, it's not like they can vanish from a locked room. It's absurd! Besides, he has checked all potential hiding spots: nothing under the furniture, nothing on top, nothing inside. Nothing at all!
Well, at least the little thing isn't stuck in one of those spots, scared and exhausted. It shouldn't be a consolation, but it is, albeit a meagre one.

If one wants to preserve hope, they have to be realistic about it. Said realism can be achieved either through effort or through a natural predisposition towards pessimism. Dazai possesses the latter in spades, so he can only plead for the following: *'may it not be scared; may it be safe and alive, even if I might never know.'*

He drains the cup and sets it down. It's near the sink, but not inside it.

He sinks onto the floor, his back against the cupboard with the edge digging into his spine: this is it, the most soothing part of his morning. Everyone, to some extent, has their own self-destructive habits, but Osamu Dazai is a collector, so: paper, tobacco, roll, lick, seal. He doesn't even need to look; thanks to the joint forces of his dexterity and the unhealthy amount of repetition, here it is, fully formed, a cigarette.

There's no lighter around, but there's a matchbox within arm's reach, tucked in the groove where the cupboard meets the flooring. He lights the cigarette by striking it against the cupboard's edge: this is a habit that has ruined the finish, but this is furniture in the ADA dormitory, what are they going to do? Sue him for the damage? Withhold a deposit he never gave in the first place?

The smoke fills his lungs: it's a welcome sensation, despite how objectively distasteful it may be, crawling down his neck and chest; he's on the floor, he is smoking. This is the present moment, which is the only place he can afford to be.

But like all good things, it ends. So, the cat is gone. This is fine. He has no ownership of it; cats are way too independent…

He takes another drag, longer, and yet it doesn't work. That previous instant of serenity has been shattered and he cannot go back. He forces his eyes to follow the smoke curling upwards, towards the ceiling, in a loose spiral.

Time flows by silently, and its passage becomes obvious only when the cigarette burns his fingers, like a built-in timer to conclude his daily rumination. All right. He stubs it out in an empty mug which, by virtue of its profession as an ashtray, lives on the floor too.

How do people get ready quickly in the morning? Dazai's always wondered. The process is a bit more perilous than it should be, for him. Hunting for clothes is time-consuming, and every catch has a problem… or a dozen: this shirt isn't fresh enough, this one has a hole in the left cuff, the beige trench coat is still damp. Only his shoes and the bolo tie rarely betray him, and it's such a relief getting to such a point.

It took him twenty minutes to find something from the pile near his futon, the corner of the room employed as a wardrobe while the proper one, which lives in the opposite corner, houses discarded and clearly forgotten garments. Today's outfit looks remarkably similar to that of the day before; he's wearing yesterday's trousers and waistcoat after all.
It's all in the details! Today's shirt is light blue, yesterday's was white! He puts the bolo tie back on: it's the same as always, the same chipped gemstone as always… or maybe it shimmers a bit brighter today, conscious of having been, albeit momentarily, invested with the title of 'cat toy'.

Eh, it's stupid.

Keys, phone, Kunikida's wallet. Yeah, that's all. Dazai pauses at the door, fingers curled around the knob, and looks back. There's nothing new in the flat: it's cluttered, dim, faintly sad, and there's no orange ball of fur in sight.

He steps into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind him without any additional thought. He's had enough thoughts for today.

We all know things change when they're not observed; the dust settles, the light shifts… and on the floor, near the couch, a single copper hair lies. It's far too long to have come from any cat, and it's also fine and wavy.

Its destiny is to linger there, unnoticed, until the next time Dazai bothers to clean the floor. If history is any indication, it never will.

The Armed Detective Agency office wakes up at different paces.
Kunikida arrives at seven sharp, as he always does. This feat is achieved not through a natural unravelling of things, but by simply arriving around six-fifty and then standing in front of the door, waiting, eyes on his watch, for seven to come.

Already on, the light competes with the morning sky, and Ranpo is there, seated at his desk and wrapped in a blanket. This is neither usual nor surprising: sometimes he's way too early, at times he doesn't show up at all. It's one of those things that just is, one of the many quirks of the organisation as a whole.
By the time Kunikida sets his bag down, Ranpo is biting into his second melon pan and has the news pulled up on his laptop.

“[...] unprecedented damage to the warehouse district,” comes from the speaker. “No clear culprit has been identified, the number of casualties is still uncertain. What we know is that three buildings collapsed, sometime in the early evening, with no reported witnesses just yet. Authorities are working tirelessly to shed light on the incident.”

“Ranpo-san, isn’t that a bit loud?”

“Shh!”

Shaky aerial footage flashes on the screen, showing a wasteland of rubble: concrete shattered in slabs, glass dusted over every surface and shimmering in the morning light. Only a single lamp-post is still standing.

Ranpo’s eyes open just in time to catch the ground-level shot: there’s debris everywhere, that’s something anyone can see. But he sees more, the evidence is always on the scene and people are too dumb to notice: no scorch marks, no radial blast pattern. This isn’t the aftermath of an explosion. Eventually the authorities will figure this out too.
“Some of the casualties have been linked to the infamous Port Mafia, which makes this case [...]”

Not really listening anymore; he’s cracking the mystery in between bites.
If the building hasn’t exploded, what has occurred? The camera pans a bit wider: a container, a car frame, what looks like a part of a crane… all of the metal is deformed, crushed and, seemingly, aimed at something specific.

Crushed and aimed? What a surprisingly peculiar tactic! One that requires an ability that works in a truly unique way too!
Amongst the ability users in the city of Yokohama, only one has an ability known for similar mechanics.

Wait, so the casualties? Port Mafia on the scene, a peculiar pattern of destruction. It’s easy, a child could crack this case: Nakahara Chuuya, Port Mafia Executive, seeking revenge for his own organization, employing the surrounding debris as projectiles. He’s not responsible for the initial damage, that’s true, but for the anomalous distribution of the debris.

A still frame depicts yet another close up: half-hidden under a slab of concrete, a single black glove. A confirmation, how lovely. He finally takes his glasses off, setting them down on his desk.
The mystery is closed, filed away amongst the myriad of invisible successes Ranpo carries.

Except.
The Port Mafia usually does its cleanup in a far more precise manner; why hadn’t it been done? Why was the glove left behind?
Rushed, then. Why? Rush means no time, no time implies the Mafia became aware of the incident far too late to respond properly. But if Nakahara was there, which he clearly was, why didn’t he report it in time?

He must have been unable to do that. Was he taken out of commission? How do you do that to a gravity manipulator? Ranpo sets the half-eaten melon pan down. All right, he’s reopening

the case, this is not boring any longer.

For half an hour he has nothing to deduce, no more details to help him unravel the puzzle he's entertaining himself with. Aid comes up a bit later, after one taiyaki or a couple, buried in an ordinary conversation.

Kunikida, amidst sorting paperwork with the Tanizakis, frowns at nothing. "That reminds me… has either of you heard anything this morning? It was akin to something hitting the ceiling in Dazai's hallway."

"No, not really," Naomi replies, spinning lightly on her chair.

"I assumed it was him dropping something, yet it was far too early for Dazai to be awake, so I didn't check," Kunikida adds, with a pinch of regret in his voice. Maybe such an oddity, in the ADA compound, in the early morning, was worth investigating. He didn't. Of course not, it wasn't suspicious enough to interfere with his ideal morning.

Ceiling. Dazai's hallway. Early morning.

New data that is, at first glance, not related to the puzzle Ranpo's toying with. Yet.

A noise coming from the ceiling of their specific building can be explained in only two ways: it came from the rooftop or, in a more interesting interpretation, it truly came from the ceiling.

You see, deduction has its rules, and usually bizarre coincidences tend to be linked, even if it seems insane at first glance. What is loud enough to be heard and can move on a ceiling? No, who can walk on a ceiling?

It's two puzzles converging into a single, albeit not comprehensive, answer: a short Port Mafia Executive.
So, for now he can locate Nakahara in the warehouse district, in the evening, and then in the ADA dormitory, which is not too far away on foot, in the morning. All whilst maintaining radio silence with his own organisation.

How fascinating; a web of events Ranpo cannot see, not yet, not in its entirety. That is the best part of it. The best mysteries are the few that are bashful enough not to display everything at first glance, but that timidly tease, beckoning one forwards.

Dazai arrives at a quarter past ten, which is late even for his non-existent standards. Today he walks in quietly, hangs his coat and sits at his desk like a normal person.

This is the second clue: there is no universe in which Dazai Osamu is a normal person. Even when it's clear that the emptiness has taken hold, even then and especially then, his dramatics increase in what, according to Ranpo, is a subconscious plea to be seen. The performance becomes unavailable when there's something important to be done, or when something sinks deep enough to affect him.

One day each year, when it always happens, but today's date doesn't match.

Kunikida says something about schedules to which Dazai gives a non-committal hum in response, a non-answer that makes the blond man's eye twitch, but still he lets the matter drop.

Then Dazai shifts in his chair, crossing one leg over the other; this he frequently does when he's about to start working. During regular days the interval between 'Dazai arriving' and 'Dazai crosses his legs and opens his laptop' is roughly equal to thirty-seven minutes. Not today.

Regardless, the light from the window slides across the cream-coloured fabric of his trousers, unveiling a new piece of the same puzzle. There, caught on fabric, is a small cluster of fine, short copper hairs. Definitely not human.

Those behavioural clues lose their relevance in favour of the hairs: definitely not human. Most certainly not a dog, given that Dazai would never get close enough to one for this to happen. So, a cat? Many strays are orange, after all.

So, a cat, an orange cat, maybe. There's a simple way to check: "Brought a friend home last night, Dazai?"

Dazai blinks, looking up from his battered laptop just to hold Ranpo's gaze. The detective's green eyes are visible behind the glasses. "Yeah, nobody can hide anything from you, huh?" Dazai replies, resuming whatever job he is clearly doing, for once.

"Nobody even tries," Ranpo adds, allowing his eyes to narrow and close: this should put the bandaged man at ease, at least, and with ease some more information might come.

"Yeah, I did. Didn't last," Dazai mutters, without lifting his eyes. "Cats are like that, you know? They decide you're convenient, and then they decide you're not."

Here, in the span of a couple of sentences, there's enough to explain Dazai's mood: every reason is blatant now, but the picture is not complete, not yet.

The imperfect silence of a semi-functional office fills the space between them.

All the pieces are in his grasp now, he just has to take a proper look at them. After a slightly longer breath, after letting the anticipation linger for a moment, he dives in: warehouse district, Nakahara fights something, he is left unable to give a report. Roughly a dozen hours later, a thump on a ceiling. Only one man can walk on ceilings, and it's Nakahara again. It's not a reach, it's the only plausible answer, the simplest alternative is the correct one; bizarre as it might be.
Dazai, a cat, a stray that didn't stay. An orange cat.

It takes Ranpo all of his will-power not to laugh, and he conceals the hilarity behind a bite of red liquorice.
Absurdity permanently resides in Yokohama; that's not new, but it doesn't make it any less ridiculous.

Ranpo cocks his head to the side; Dazai is staring at his laptop, actually typing. Oh poor idiot, he doesn't know.

If he talked, Ranpo would give him the answer and a good dose of teasing, but Dazai hasn't asked for it. The taller man seems to be intent on wallowing in his own misery, which is tied to the fact he has only a partial picture of the events.
Everything Ranpo knows about him suggests that Dazai won't ask, at least unless something else comes his way. Eh, his loss.

It's funnier if Dazai doesn't know, isn't it?

Ranpo's lips curve in a smirk; he is, indeed, the world's greatest detective, and he has a front-row seat to witness a comedy played by actors unaware of the plot itself.

Spare clothes are Chuuya's only option.

They live in the bottom of a drawer, sealed in plastic and pressed between a file of an old mission report and a silver tobacco holder. A white shirt, black trousers, socks, underwear: the bare minimum not to attract any stare. He's got enough of that earlier, when he was traversing the main Port Mafia skyscraper in borrowed clothes that engulfed him. He has made his entrance barefoot and stepping on the joggers' hems almost at every step; currently those clothes reside in the rubbish bin, sharing it with plenty of scrunched up paper.

Yet, even now, with shoes brought to him by a low-ranking grunt, he might as well be naked. His hat is missing in action. Yes, he knows that the saying shouldn't be applied to an item; he's aware, but that's how it feels. A fallen companion, missing, its fate uncertain. The same applies to his other belongings, but money can be replaced, after all, his savings reside in off-shore accounts. His hat, on the other hand…

Regardless, he has no time to linger on such thoughts. Thinking elicits feelings, and he cannot afford them; his budget allows only for avoidance.

He should get going; the thought makes his jaw clench, a minuscule motion in a surprisingly still office. Chuuya's got dressed and he's been stuck, sitting at his desk, for at least a quarter of an hour. His gaze is firmly fixed straight ahead, almost unblinking.

You see, when you are Chuuya Nakahara and, against your will, you end up vanishing from the Port Mafia radar for the span of roughly ten hours… then you have to be ready to face the consequences.

The Port Mafia is unforgiving, but not in the way one might think: there's no bodily harm waiting for him outside of his office, there's no punishment or interrogation ready to prise his misdeeds out of him one tooth at a time.
No such thing.
It's worse, it's way worse.

He's been gone for enough time for Ozaki Kouyou to notice, and not enough time for her to act. This is a perilous position to be in: she has had no chance to seek redress for his

disappearance, but she's had enough time to develop a spark of curiosity regarding the events.
In a way there is torture and an interrogation awaiting him, but the tools aren't pliers and the interrogation is done over a piping hot cup of tea.
Usually Chuuya taints his own serving with some rum and bitches to no end, complaining about all the bullshit he's been through.

Today he'd rather part with a couple of his teeth, if that's the price for not having to talk.

Kouyou's office is at the end of the corridor. Chuuya goes without being summoned, because that's most certainly on its way anyway. It's better to act preemptively, chickening out is never an option. Kouyou-nee would get to him, regardless.

The tea is poured in silence; vapour billows in elegant swirls. The office is traditional in each and every meaning of the word: the table mandates sitting on the floor, the furniture is timeless and distinctly Japanese, and the smell of tea seems to come from every direction. Chuuya's never noticed how permeating the smell is, not until today.

Both hands wrap around the cup: it's way too hot, but putting it down would feel like weakness. Enough of being pathetic, for today at least, or rather, for a lifetime: he is fed up but not weak; he's just been turned into a fucking cat and been pampered by…

Kouyou sits across from him, serene and static, waiting. Her silky kimono adorns her sides in surprisingly symmetrical folds and her hands rest on her lap; not a twitch in sight. The curiosity is there, he knows her well enough to see it, but she's currently weaponising patience.

"You know, lad, that when the cleanup crew arrived the news helicopters were already circling?" She starts with this, a query that's a reprimand in disguise.

"Ane-san, I know… sorry for the fuckin' headline."

"Apologies are of no use, explanations are," she retorts as her nails clink against the ceramic of her cup.

Chuuya takes a breath that's more like a drag of air, sharp and impatient. He knows she's not mad, that's not how she acts when she is, but his eyes haven't met hers just yet. "There was a weird-ass thing, responsible for that bullshit. I engaged with it, threw fuckin' concrete, it reformed, then it hit me and I went down, okay?!"

"You lost consciousness," she muses, and it'd be perfect if she believed it. She clearly doesn't, nobody would. It takes very specific circumstances to knock him out cold, and the premises currently laid out don't match.

"Duh."

"For how long?"

“Dunno, few hours, maybe more,” Chuuya mutters. He stays still, his blue eyes tracing the hem of his own cup; his hands hold on tight to the cup. The heat has reddened his palm, however he hasn’t let it go just yet. A sting should come any time now, no? Even if it does, it doesn’t register properly.

Kouyou takes a sip, savouring it before setting it down. “And then you woke, you made your way back here barefoot, without your own clothes or your hat.” Here it is, the hole in his story, the point where he’s supposed to crack.

The thing is, truth is on the tip of his tongue, it’s an option. Being transformed by some freak wearing human skin isn’t a crime, it doesn’t touch his honour. He could just say ‘I turned into a cat, or I hallucinated doing so.’ Chuuya could, he really could, but he doesn’t for a very simple reason: more questions would follow, and they’d lead somewhere he refuses to go. So he buries it: the grave is neat and private, and he stands over it convinced it’s deep enough. It has to be deep enough, obviously, because who the hell would guess that he spent last night purring on the bandaged bastard’s chest?
Nobody would.
Nobody.

“I’ve been hit, I wasn’t thinkin’ straight, what the fuck ya want me to tell ya?!” The growl tears out of him before he can catch it, loud and defensive, and his head snaps up for the first time since he sat down. Their eyes meet; he’s cornered, they both know it.

Kouyou doesn’t flinch, she’s used to his outburst at this point; her mouth curves in a gentle smile instead.
Oh no.
She got what she wanted: not the story, but the feeling. Chuuya gave her more than enough: the tone of his voice, the way his hands are strangling a cup he’s refusing to put down. She knows enough.

This, by itself, would be a catastrophe, a thought he’d be ruminating on for aeons to come. But that’s when he notices the hairpin.

Kouyou wears it every day, an ornament of gold and jade nestled within the red strands of her updo; it sways with every breath. He’s seen it a thousand times, if not more. It’s insignificant.

The pendant swings. Left, right, left. His eyes follow it, his pupils widen: track it, track it, get it, it cannot escape. A twitch in his right hand, his index curls like it’s getting ready to… no, hell no. Kouyou doesn’t notice, or, more probably, she pretends not to.

“Go home. Rest. I’ve sent some more men to retrieve your hat.” She pauses. “And if you feel uncertain… come to me before you do anything stupid.”

“Define stupid,” he answers way too quickly, and suddenly he’s a teenager again, blurting out the first response coming to his lips.

“I have faith you’ll know it when you see it, lad.”

He almost laughs as he lifts himself up from the floor, legs stiff, and makes for the door. “Gee, thanks.” He doesn’t trust himself to look at the hairpin again.

The door closes behind him. For the first time since he joined the organisation, Chuuya is going home early.

Taking a vehicle is the wisest option; he decides to walk. It’s not far, it should take twenty minutes. It doesn’t.

It ends up taking forty minutes: he keeps stopping. It’s not a choice of his, it’s the circumstances. Once his legs decide they’ve had enough, and he leans to catch his breath, his body feels borrowed. Besides this permeating exhaustion slowing his pace, there’s also the fact that the world is full of distractions.

How he has never noticed before is beyond him. The city carries so many different smells, tangled and very distinct, it’s all up to how the wind blows. Exhaust fumes cutting through something sweet escaping a bakery. The rattle of a delivery truck, a burst of laughter from the side, heels clicking on the floor: when has the city become so noisy? More importantly, there are so many dogs. Now, this, on a regular day, would be amazing news: Chuuya has an uncanny ability to befriend dogs. It doesn’t take much, really, just the right body language and showing enough appreciation, and those smart and loyal creatures… they just get it! He has the bad habit of stopping and crouching for every dog he sees. It’s actually one of the best parts of his days.

Today, however, whilst he’s almost halfway home, a poodle stops him right in his tracks, and Chuuya does something he’d never done in his life.
He flinches.
It’s not big, it is not noticeable to human eyes, but his heels lift off the pavement as he shifts his weight away from the dog. The poodle sniffs his shoe, tail wagging… this would have been such a welcome sight on every other day.

This is a well-loved dog, the recent grooming is unmistakable. It’s a nice, pretty and polite little thing…

The poodle looks up at him, and Chuuya stares back down.

For one split-second, just the span of a breath, he sees it through different lenses: too close, too interested, teeth too sharp, both a threat and competition.

After shooting him a dirty look, the dog’s owner tugs the leash. “Come on, Biscuit.”

Biscuit comes, removing itself from Chuuya’s path. He stays there, his ungloved hand pressed against his own chest, trying to soothe his own heart which is caught between alertness and fear. Fear? Fuck no, he doesn’t have the time to process this.

By the time he reaches his building he’s taken a detour, adding so many unnecessary minutes to his walk, just to avoid every street where he heard barking.

He knows what this is. Wait, no, he has a theory: the transformation might still be lingering in his bones, like an infection of sorts. After all, not even a cold goes away all at once, but it gradually subsides, and some symptoms can persist for weeks. Same as a hangover.
Yes, this is what it is.
A hangover, one not produced by alcohol but by… well, the experience of being a cat for a night. It's bound to have residual effects.

The apartment welcomes him: it's dark, it's cool, it's home. He locks the door behind him, kicks off the borrowed shoes and he makes it to the bathroom. Exactly what you would expect of someone who used to have nothing: luxurious but relatively unadorned. Having the means allowed him to purchase the place, the appliances, the furniture… but decorations aren't that easy. Sure, one could pay for them, but then, how does one live with them? Given that he doesn't fully grasp their usefulness? He is learning though, and that's been years in the making; the immediate benefit, the thing he grasped, it's to have pretty things to look at. That's all.
The penthouse is his space: it doesn't have to communicate shit to others, but just to himself.

Standing in front of the sink he opens the tap, letting the tepid water run on his hands.
Normal, everything is normal.

His hand rises to his face.

It happens, this is not a choice; the hand is curled, it won't do anything useful like this… yet his index brushes against his cheekbone. The pattern starts before he catches himself: his fingers brush against his cheek before dragging down to his jaw, and then up again towards his ear.
Eh?!

Chuuya snatches his hand away in a motion that's way more aggressive than necessary. He stares at his reflection, at his wet fingers. Betrayal flashes behind his eyes. It was subconscious, but that doesn't excuse…

Only one item in this space is, indeed, decorative, and that's the mirror's frame. It's an ornate thing, an art nouveau piece, with gold embedded in a pleasant geometric pattern.
As the gold shimmers the bewilderment subsides, fading away as his mind gets delightfully distracted. Tilting his head at tiny angles in either direction makes it glitter even more, catching the artificial light in enchanting variations.

Okay, he's definitely done with the bathroom, isn't he? It takes him a solid minute to move, to stop this useless observation of the mirror he's owned for at least three years now.

This is… it's alright, it's bound to happen. Sure, it's not a normal occurrence, yes, but when has his life been normal? He doesn't have time to linger on the thought. The doorbell rings once.

Pondering who might come to visit requires patience, which is something Chuuya doesn't have. He opens the door without checking the spyhole, which is stupid, but today he's not in the mood for it: if someone wants to kill him on the doorstep they can bloody well try.

It’s Yuda; he’s one of the grunts who got promoted from errand-boy to actual field work sometime in the last few months. He’s standing straight, holding a sealed black bag like it might explode.
“Nakahara-san. Ozaki-san sent me to deliver your… belongings.” The young man’s voice is tight, nervous.
Chuuya takes the bag automatically, holding it steady even if his first instinct is to immediately start digging for the only thing that truly matters.

“Aight, good job.” This is all Chuuya musters, in a decently flat tone, before closing the door. The last thing he notices is Yuda’s eyes being firmly fixed on the top of the doorframe. Oh, smart kid. Don’t look the executive in the eye when he’s like this.

He upends the bag onto the kitchen table without ceremony. Everything tumbles out in a pile and his hands immediately sort through it, pushing the grey waistcoat aside, the harness, one glove, until his fingers close around the brim of his hat. Oh, it’s here, they found it even if it was so well hidden.

Up it comes; Chuuya holds it in front of his face, checking the crown, the top and the chain. Sure, it’s a bit dusty, that’s to be expected, but it’s alright: no damage whatsoever. It’s a relief, yes, and it’s also objectively stupid; those two things can coexist, humans aren’t rational creatures. At least the spark of connection with symbolism to the detriment of logic is something that Chuuya grasps wonderfully well.

Cataloguing the rest takes him a brief glance: everything is there, good. Even if something was amiss, he could replace it, it wouldn’t matter.
A prickling sensation dusts his fingertips.
Back to the hat, there’s something about the inner band that looks off. Only by angling it towards the light is he able to see inside, and there it is, the source of that feeling: a piece of paper is poking out from beneath the sweatband. No, it’s not exactly paper, it feels thinner and yet somehow stronger, like leather… or skin.

He pinches the corner and draws it free before setting the hat down, delicately, on the table. It unfolds in a sizable rectangle adorned with red ink, neat and evenly spaced, no sign of rushing.

“Heed the hours, mark them well:
Dusk is where the small things dwell.
Man again, beneath the sun,
Dawn unspins what dusk has done.
The cycle breaks on one of two:
A spoken truth, a love that’s true.”

The meaning is not difficult to grasp; it’s blatant, and it could only be so to his own eyes. He doesn’t like it one fucking bit, but he got it. A threatening note would be more welcome than this nursery rhyme, Chuuya’s fluent with the former after all, and yet this is what he got.

Now, like any other sane person, Chuuya reads it once, twice; then he sets the note down.

“What. The. Fuck.”

It echoes into the empty flat, as the rays of a dying sun start painting each and every surface with strokes of gold and copper.

Chapter End Notes

So, welcome to the final notes! Now I can say that writing Edogawa Ranpo is a headache, I had to check the previous chapter for consistency, all whilst trying to make the deduction believable. I don't know if I fully managed it, but I tried to do my best. I'd say this is my first attempt writing "super-deduction" in action, and my main fear is that excessive exposition might have made that chunk of the fanfic a bit too boring.
Regardless, it's been lovely torturing soukoku a bit more. I know, I'm sorry they haven't interacted in this chapter, but it had to be as such, it's out of my control, I just couldn't conceive this chapter any differently, but don't you worry, it'll happen.
I cannot give precise estimates for the next chapter, even if I have it already outlined, both because August is an unpredictable month, and because I have 'Noise Complaints' which has to be written at the same time. I'm sorry I cannot give you an ETA now.
That said, thank you so much for reading, and if you could leave a comment it'd make my day!
°. .

Chapter 3: The cycle breaks on one of two.

Chapter Notes

> I'm genuinely sorry for the long wait! I had a pretty clear idea of how this fanfic was going to end, and said idea escaped my outline (it breatched containment, oh no) and it grew and grew... and it became two chapters.
> Hence, this one is, regrettably (or maybe luckily) not the end, not just yet. Speaking of the title, I've committed to following the curse's verses, and it'd feel weird not to do so; regardless, I hope you'll enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The note is, against all odds, warning him that the transformation won't be a one-off, it'll occur again when the light fades; the note is very straightforward about it in a way curses rarely are. It could be a trick… maybe, maybe not… *the hell does he know*!

He paces the length of the penthouse, between the open kitchen and the living room windows, again and again.

Why has he been given such a level of detail? That *creature* must be laughing its arse off, if it has one. Does he need to know about the curse, because that's what it is, for it to work? No, that's wishful thinking, it'd work regardless.

No, it's worse than that, how very surprising. It's a declaration: *'here's how it works. I'm letting you know because there's nothing you can do about it'*.

It's fundamentally sadistic, quite probably crafted with that specific clarity just to instil helplessness. If that's the case, then good fucking job.

He stops at the window; in the reflection his lips are reduced to a thin line merged with the view of the sun being swallowed by the horizon. Chuuya has twenty minutes, give or take, to solve this. Duh, he won't be solving shit without a voice or opposable thumbs, he'd be powerless.

Gently, he abandons the hat on the sofa cushions before circling it. His hands find the back of the sofa and grip it; the surface barely gives under his fingers, and the resistance itself is somewhat soothing.

"Think, ya useless piece of shit," he mutters to himself as he taps his left foot against the polished linoleum. Should he just get on his bike and ride east? He cannot outpace the night, that'd work only as long as there are roads.

His chest is tight, his breathing is speeding up, pulse hammering and shattering his thoughts: not even facing enemies alone, ever elicited this shitty state. Should he call for backup? Kouyou? No, if he wanted for her to know he would have said it, in person, earlier. If Ane-san is not an option, the same applies to the rest of the organisation.

Every inhale whistles through his nose; no intake is enough to placate his heartbeat.

What if he…

Chuuya's thoughts are tripping over each other as he frantically chases a non-existent solution. The people he'd trust with this are few in number, and one is the woman he just lied to, and the rest are dead.

Who might be able to fix this without making it worse?

Someone who conceives plans with the same ease as taking a breath, someone who could deal with the impossible without asking too many questions, someone…

Dazai?

Since when has a suicide-obsessed maniac, who would humiliate him if he knew, become the best option? How could the worst bastard in Yokohama help?! Chuuya would be giving him ammunition for a lifetime: a link between himself and the cat, a cat who purred and kneaded. Chuuya would never, ever live it down.

Why is he even considering this? Nothing good would ever come from it, so why the fuck?! Yet the temptation is there, unjustified and frustrating, propelled by feeble memories: a towel drying his fur, the pressure of a hand between his ears, canned crab on a plate, a heartbeat under his whole body, a gemstone swaying. Every sensation is painted with the same hues: warmth and safety.

Chuuya's hands race upwards, resting on his forearms and gripping: his nails are human, still, but they dig reddening crescents into his freckled skin. The pain is sobering, at least; it doesn't solve shit, but it makes the world sharper.

Clearly, cats are stupid: nothing sensible would associate Dazai with feeling safe.

It doesn't matter if he carries you in one hand or dries you off. The food meant nothing, and neither did being taken care of for a single night.

Yet, there's a single bullshit thought that refuses to die: *Dazai didn't have to do any of that.* Last night there were no witnesses or rewards; such premises imply a very uncomfortable truth: if not observed, and maybe only then, the bastard is capable of kindness.

This is *new.*

It doesn't mean shit, though; Dazai is still the man he knows, and a fragment of human decency doesn't mean contacting the bastard is a real option.

Sure, there has been a four-year gap between the man Chuuya knew and the one he met last night. Nothing really changed, forget it; Dazai of all people would never change.

Chuuya sinks onto the floor, nodding to himself, almost trying to convince himself that this is the most sensible thing to do, that he's not hiding. Regardless, he ends up sheltered behind the couch, with his forehead pressed against it.

Nobody can help him, end of story. He should just go to bed and sleep it off. He could carry on with his life even if he spends his nights being a cat, after all.

He could live with it! Chuuya grits his teeth, his mouth open wide in a bastardized version of a smile; what's with all the fucking despair!? Why are there tears prickling the corners of his eyes? He survived worse, and when there's no solution in sight one has to let this type of emotion fizzle out: sorrow is useless when there's no action to be taken.

Yeah, that is true… but that place was safe, that person was safe, he can help, he *will* help.

On impulse, he fishes his phone out of his pocket. He's not doing anything at all, of course, but the shadows around him are growing longer, more distorted with every passing minute. He should be acting, he should be thinking… his thumb hovers aimlessly for a brief moment before opening a specific contact.

The chat itself is frozen in time, stuck on a text Chuuya himself sent four years ago. It's *'fuck you',* simple enough not to require additional explanations. This text bubble and a myriad of others, right above it, stare up at him: explicitly they convey very little, and the truth resides in the empty spaces, everything unsaid. Dazai always understood.

Did he though?

Even that last text, it was about the car, fucking obviously it was about the car. It had been sent under the delusion that it was a charade, just another taunt of many, so there would have been more time to throw more insults at the bastard, in the hope that he'd discern the pattern nestled between the swearwords.

Looking at them now, those two words withstanding the passage of time, there's very little anyone could extrapolate except *rejection.*

Nah, Dazai is smarter than that! And even if, it's not like it would have affected him to begin with!

Most certainly not enough to rant about lost things to a cat… four years later. Oh, so… being wrong about one thing, or a couple, doesn't imply Chuuya should rely on the bastard! He gently places the phone on the linoleum, glaring at it from above; it felt a bit too heavy, a splinter of sensation that flashed within his hands before fading.

Of course the conversation stalled: Chuuya blocked him the moment the events became clear enough to label Dazai as a traitor.

It was the right thing to do, a condition for his own survival within the organisation he's loyal to.

A couple of months ago Chuuya had unblocked him, right before facing an unkillable thing from the bottom of the ocean; yeah, he's tactical like that. The thing could have gone sideways in the blink of an eye, the Mafia had just lost so many men, and with no way to contact him directly, it would have been idiotic. He'd been right, and he's also been lying; yes, those things can coexist.

He stretches out his arms without thinking … and all the joints are wrong: locked and seized, unresponsive and unable to fluidly perform the motion. It's happening, no matter how hard he's been trying to ignore it.

Before his eyes his fingers shorten and stiffen whilst the nails curl and sharpen. A breath later, a crunching sound fills the space; it's coming from inside his own body: vertebrae being compressed and rearranged. He gags at the pressure, yet it's not really as painful as he expected it to be.

Shit; time's up.

The phone, where's the fucking phone? Oh, there.

The world dilates; there's not time to appreciate how bizarre that is, because he is shrinking. At least his index finger still works, if he jabs at the screen. Okay, shit. His eyelashes flutter as he takes a deep breath to gather all the focus he can muster.

The chat is still open, *'Blue Mackerel'* occupies the top of the screen. There's no time to weigh pros and cons: there's nobody else to contact, and even if there were, Chuuya has no time to select a different contact.

Behind him, breaking free from his black trousers by slithering above the waistband, a fluffy orange tail unfurls and curls.

Fuck it.

Pressing down with everything he has, each letter still takes three or four attempts because the paw-pad slides on the glass and the autocorrect is a bitch.

He hits four keys at once, ending up with a jumble of letters. Before trying again he deletes them all; then, one key, finally, but the wrong one. Shit, shit… no, frustration is a waste of time.

Suddenly, the phone expands to tablet size under his touch… which is surprisingly useful, actually: type, he can still type.

The keyboard shines bright and sharp, whilst the world grows duller: every drop of red bleeds away, leaving blue and yellow in its wake.

'my plae'

‘hrurry’

‘plwas e’

Sent. All of it. The first two texts don’t say enough: all of his hope rests on the last one. It’s awfully written, but it’s a plea, coming from Chuuya… that should be enough to alert someone who, unfortunately, knows him well.

He never makes contact with the cool floor as he curls into a little ball right atop his own clothes. Pain would be easier to understand than this: nothing aches, but exhaustion is enough for him to succumb. Snout pressed against his front paws, his last coherent thought is nothing but regret: he should have opened the canned crab when he had the chance to do so.

The phone vibrates against the low table set in front of the couch; it’s a single buzz that brushes the edges of his perception. Dazai doesn’t move; one notification means nothing and implies no urgency: he’s lying on the couch, knees folded over the arm with his bare feet dangling.

There’s a book lying next to his hip, but it’s not even open: there was an attempt at reading, but it didn’t go past the step of selecting the book. At least when the time is ripe, when his mind becomes cooperative, he won’t have to stand up to pick something to read.

This has been going on for an hour or so, which he has spent existing in the dim light, one arm draped over his chest.

The phone lights up again. A second vibration, a brief pause, a third one. Okay, definitely more significant, but oh-so-annoying. His hand reaches for the phone, and the screen glows bright enough to force him to squint.

Three messages, one sender: *‘Slug’*.

His lips part but nothing comes out; the line between his brows deepens. What? Why? It’s been months since they even saw each other, which is definitely not enough for him to recover from the inevitable and nauseating abhorrence of it.

Many possibilities juggle through his mind in the span of a breath: it may be a prank, or the texts might simply be meant for someone else. The content might be gibberish, just an accidental text or something, even if that would mean Chuuya had this chat open to begin with.

Before making assumptions and painting vivid scenarios he should take in the texts themselves, shouldn’t he?

The left corner of his mouth twitches upwards, just a nudge, before dropping. It’s neither a smirk nor its failure, but a reflex: the mere muscle memory of responding with mockery. It dies before it forms. Okay, that’s a lot of information squeezed in only four words. There’s a location, an undercurrent of panic… and the last one is… indecipherable.

Option one: he’s drunk. It’s a simple explanation, really, Chuuya has a wine collection, and even if his alcohol consumption has always been moderate he’s also a lightweight. But then, why the urgency?

So, he needs a better scenario: something time-sensitive happened, and Chuuya is incapacitated. Not bad, second try might be a good one, but still he’s not taking into account the most glaring uncertainty: why him? Why not Kouyou? She’s certainly far higher in any ranking of ‘people Chuuya trusts’. No, wait, even some random off the street would be higher-ranking than Dazai himself, so that’s a glaring inconsistency he should take into account before doing anything else.

Indeed, it takes just a bit of patience! Dazai is well-versed in the ways Chuuya operates, he just needs to give himself a minute to think about it. Instead he stands, and the motion is sudden enough that his vision swims for half a second. His coat is off the hook, his keys are in his hand, whilst he types with the other.

Knowing exactly what he’s doing is beyond him, at this instant, but it can be blamed on the simple fact that in almost three years of occasionally working side by side he’s never, ever, heard Chuuya say ‘please’.

For now he can, at least, test the waters: any follow-up reply could untangle the unexplained. The best way to obtain an answer, especially from someone as volatile as the *slug*, is also one of Dazai’s few pleasures in this world: annoying him.

‘*My, my, a new low! Take a deep breath, hatrack. Now try again and use your big-boy words this time.’*

He’s walking fast, and he doesn’t really need to look at the screen to type or send. If he gets an additional answer, good, that’s information. Even if he doesn’t… that’d be useful too, extremely so; this is a perfect bait, and if Chuuya doesn’t take it… then he simply *cannot* answer. If the latter happens to prevail, then Dazai’s current long stride is not as pathetic as it seems.

The corridor stretches ahead, lit by those annoying fluorescent tubes that have been giving him headaches for years. He makes it a dozen steps before a door opens on his left.

It’s just a gap: a soft creak followed by a sliver of warm light.

“Ah.”

Ranpo doesn’t step out, it’d be too much work. He just stands there, barefoot, heels on the hems of his pyjama bottoms and a chocolate bar in hand.

“Dazai, whatever it is you’re doing… do it faster, and think less,” he drones before taking a bite. Of course, he chews slowly before swallowing: Ranpo has all the time in the world, after all! “Thinkin’ is not your best skill, that’s a fact.”

“Ranpo-san, I-”

“And the konbini on the corner closes in twenty minutes. There’s tuna on sale this week.” The door swings shut, effectively ending the conversation.

What does tuna have to do with this? Does Ranpo want some? He usually asks Kunikida this type of thing…

Queries dance behind Dazai’s eyes, a frantic multitude with no answer in sight. If there's any advice, within that tangle of apparently disjointed sentences, then it’s a simple one: he should be rushing.

The compound door swings shut behind him, and he rushes down the stairs as the cold scratches his exposed skin. It’s tolerable: the timid cold of an autumn that has yet to properly sprout. Yesterday’s rain still lingers in the air, and the smell of wet asphalt fills his nostrils.

Dazai walks, but in the span of a minute he catches himself jogging and he’s forcing his legs to slow down. Running draws attention, and that’s the last thing he needs given that he’s about to board public transport with a modified card that expired for two years.

The ticket gates glow under harsh and cold lights; the battered plastic card slides through the reader and, for a moment, the light flashes red… and then a stuttering green followed by a cheerful beep. The gate parts before him, no alarms, it still works. Dazai slips through without breaking stride.

Platform three. The next train arrives in four minutes, and he spends three of those standing completely still whilst his mind whizzes.

Where is he going? Whilst he has no address, ‘*my place’* could only refer to the overpriced penthouse Chuuya purchased five years ago. If he had moved, it’s probable he’d have sent an address, no? What if it’s just someone who acquired a mafioso’s phone and is now playing tricks with that line of communication?

The carriage is half-empty when he steps inside. From a seat near the window he has a perfect view: businessmen with dead eyes, a student asleep on his bag, a woman scrolling her phone, a couple seated near the exit. Normal people doing normal things at twenty-five minutes past eight on an ordinary evening. Human beings just do what they do: revelling in their imperfect lives, complaining about them, but still, they keep on living. If their existence were intolerable, then they wouldn’t be *on* the train, but rather… it doesn’t matter right now.

The messages are messy, and each word is still bright in his mind. There is no feeling in his gut, no tingle suggesting that something bad is about to happen. That’s objectively worse, uncertainty is always worse.

He blinks and forces his eyes to follow each branch on the route map for a bit; he zeroes in on the correct one without much thought. So, Minatomirai has twelve stops, and *that one* incredibly tacky building is close to the eighth one.

Gingerly, the train thrums beneath him. If Chuuya hasn't moved and this is not a prank, then the address he remembers is still correct. He probably still remembers the keycode, and if he doesn't there's a hairpin in his pocket.

Third. Fourth. The woman gets off. Fifth.

Stations pass in a soothing rhythm: announcement, doors, pause, doors. *Hrurry.* The city blurs past, smears of neon on a backdrop of murk.

Sixth. Nobody moves.

A pachinko parlour, a closed pharmacy… he avoids his own reflection in the glass. His reflection has always had an uncanny quality to it, a certain dullness in his eyes that he hopes nobody else can see. Dazai knows it's there, but ignoring it makes him a bit less aware.

Seventh.

If he's late he's wasting time; wasting time could have consequences. Ranpo said that he should be doing it faster, so this is time-sensitive, isn't it?

Eight stops, his stop.

He's on his feet before the doors open.

At least he knows where he's going; his stride eats up the pavement, leaving the station behind. Wet leaves stick to the soles of his shoes as he rounds the corner, and there it is: the high-rise looms ahead, a monument to both obscene wealth and tacky taste.

A security guard's chair sits empty, the monitors left unwatched… how delightful. The lift doors open to a box of mirrors on a marble floor, and he steps in even if it demands a keycard he doesn't have. If it hasn't been changed, then there must be… a hidden service keypad, tucked in a corner. He'd learnt the master-code for this building years ago; he types it in out of pure muscle memory. He keeps his eyes on the marble floors in order to avoid his own reflection, and, just because, he scrapes a leaf from his shoe right onto the sheen: a smear of mud and orange.

Perhaps Chuuya will simply open the door, furious and alive; the thought perishes before it forms.

2919. He types the code mindlessly, and the door yields without a fight. It hasn't changed, why hasn't he changed it? Maybe Chuuya simply couldn't be bothered, because traitors don't come back. A bit of a security risk, but a minimal one.

No, it doesn't cross his mind that the opposite is equally plausible: not changing the code equates to leaving the door open; it could speak of disdain, or, equally, it could be a whisper of hope.

Inside, the penthouse is a showroom of spite, overflowing with leather and glass, well-polished luxury designed for a single pair of eyes. As usual, it's way too clean: nobody so high up in the mafia hierarchy worries much about chores, but everyone has their own

preferences for how many times a week a space has to be polished and sanitised. The frequency is an excessive one, at least to Dazai's eyes, but nobody should ever pay a thought to the cleaning standards of a man whose bathroom ceiling is adorned with mould.

Dazai's entry has been silent, and the light is off: the immense space is bathed in the neon bleed from the city below… but there's nothing here.

He slips through the dark entryway, fingers trailing the wall. One hand reaches for the light switch, and the penthouse reveals itself, glimmering in a diffused golden light filtered by Murano glass.

In the kitchen, a couple of tins sit on the counter, with nothing else worth noticing. Where's their owner?

No blood, no signs of forced entry, no struggle, and no signs of the Port Mafia executive who texted him gibberish.

A hideous hat… *the* hideous hat! It's resting on the couch cushions, positioned with care, almost as if someone set it down before… what? Disappearing, apparently.

Yes, definitely disappearing against his will; a suicidal man doesn't plead, usually. Not everyone properly commits to it, and regret can always sprout right at the last instant, not that Dazai himself ever experienced such foolish hope, but if that were to be the case with the mafioso… oh,what an ironic twist of fate would it be!

Sarcastic catastrophising is never of help, but it doesn't hurt too much either, in virtue of making the absurd a smidge less daunting.

Mindlessly he circles the couch, giving his back to the living room and about to head towards the bedroom; then he sees it. A speck of copper behind the sofa, curled tight on a pile of familiar clothes.

It's a cat. An orange cat, asleep behind Chuuya's couch.

It's just *an orange* cat, come on. Weird but not extraordinary, perhaps the dog just got a pet.

Yet he crouches; the cat's face is buried in its own tail, ears relaxed. It's just so *tiny.* The pieces don't connect, they refuse to… or maybe Dazai isn't ready to join them just yet.

Its fur is clean and familiar; he simply stares, because touching feels like a crime and his brain isn't cooperating much.

That's it.

The cat from last night.

Not the same cat, here's not enough proof to decree it with a single glance alone, but emotions don't really wait for facts.

“Of all the things to steal,” he murmurs. “Of all the ways you could’ve got your revenge… *my cat*?!”

My cat. The voice is infuriating and familiar, and it’s enough to dissolve Chuuya’s sleep. His eyes snap open to an oversized world, and Dazai is right there: the detective is crouched, frozen mid-reach. *Revenge? Stealing?!* Chuuya’s body reacts to the words: he lurches backwards and his spine hits the sofa’s wooden frame with a *thunk.*

I didn’t steal your fucking cat, you idiot, I AM your cat! This unvoiced thought flattens his ears and puffs his tail up to twice its size. Chuuya carefully avoids processing that he just implied that he is *owned.* No, he’s not touching that, not in this feline form, not ever, thank you very much.

Instead, he focuses on the outrage elicited by that idiotic accusation. A yowl escapes him, undignified and irate, but it’s short-lived: Dazai’s eyes are helplessly open and devoid of amusement.

“Easy…?”

Meant to be soothing, but ultimately the tone is thin and uncertain.

But he came.

As idiotic as Dazai might be, he showed up. Chuuya assumed that the bastard may have laughed it off, ignoring the texts, and that the gibberish he sent wouldn’t be enough. Instead, he’s *here.*

“Have we met before?” The query leaves Dazai’s mouth with no sharpness, in a fragile and trembling cadence; it’s scarily close to a hopeful tone.

It’s a smart question, that much Chuuya can admit, but how can he answer? His fur flattens as the panic ebbs away.

An answer comes, even if it’s not Chuuya’s choice: his body acts, before he can stop, doing the only thing it’s learnt to do when Dazai is close, the world is too big, and he himself is too small.

He purrs.

Logically it means nothing: cats purr when they’re content, and maybe that’s all Dazai’s listening to; a sociable cat who, after being startled, is now pleased to see a human around. He shouldn’t read into it.

There is no way it implies agreement.

As the purr fades Chuuya realises that the detective hasn’t understood shit. Oh, for fuck’s sake, it’s not so hard! The note. If he drags that creepy-arse note over to the bastard, maybe his supposed genius might actually be worth a damn.

Chuuya stands on unsteady legs, shakes himself and he pads past Dazai's crouched form, close enough to brush his fluffy tail against his knee before heading for the kitchen. The distance is warped, every piece of furniture towers over him… well, no shit, currently Chuuya is sized like a shoe!

Behind him, nothing, just the fridge humming.

Chuuya pauses at the boundary between the living room and the kitchen, he turns his head and stares. Dazai blinks back, still rooted in place.

Oh, you dense motherfucker.

Fuck it; he meows. It comes out sharp and insistent.

"What?"

He meows again, louder, and takes a few steps in the kitchen's direction before looking back.

"Okay," Dazai says, rising hesitantly and taking a long step in the correct direction. "I'm coming, alright." There's warmth in his voice, and a very specific one at that, the kind that implies a certain weakness.

With a satisfied chirp Chuuya resumes his walk, with tiny deliberate strides; he still has some dignity left even if his tail swishes at each step, betraying agitation he'd rather not externalise.

The black kitchen tiles are cold under his paws as he paces in a tight circle between Dazai and the counter, urging the man close because there is no way in hell he's jumping on the counter. He won't make it.

It's far too tall…

Chuuya leaps.

The jump feels right in his head, but his claws scrape uselessly against the stone, finding nothing to hold on to… and he slides down, landing on the floor with an undignified heap. So, this didn't happen. He springs to his feet just to sit down, trying to look imperious and composed with his tail neatly wrapped around his paws. *Not a fucking word or I'll bite you, arsehole.*

Dazai says nothing, but he makes a sound: a strangled laugh cut short by incredulity as he approaches the counter; his eyes drift for a moment, to the cans, then the cat right underneath him… and then, finally, the note.

"What is this?" he wonders aloud as he reaches for it; his fingers close around it and a chill runs through them. This is *definitely* not paper, no, nope. At that, he opts for pinching a corner between two fingers, holding it up to the light to squint at the unsettling red letters.

'*Heed the hours, mark them well…*'

Dazai's lips silently shape each line. So, someone killed something and wrote a curse on its hide, alright. It activates at night, clearly… and *'small things'?*

An orange cat found in the rain, that vanished from a locked room at dawn, qualifies for that.

Man again, beneath the sun.

The cat was gone in the morning.

His hand lowers and the note escapes his fingers and drifts down onto the worktop. Beneath it the cat is still there, sitting at his feet and staring up with such an expectant expression: big pleading eyes, the look cats always use to ask for food.

Chuuya didn't steal anything.

And Chuuya is right there.

A laugh punches out of him, ugly and sudden, whilst his left hand grips the edge of the kitchen island. "Oh, *slug!"* It comes out like a shaky wheeze that wraps the laugh up.

"You got yourself cursed, of all things! And what kind of curse transforms a dog into a cat?" The words are in rapid succession, born from the lingering hilarity; Dazai receives a well-deserved hiss in response.

"So, this was the plan? Hope I'll figure it out?" It's a light and teasing question, but the smile slips off his face a second later. *Tuna on sale.* Ranpo's words. That stings: he hasn't really worked it out on his own, he was herded like sheep until he could see the answer.

Whatever, it doesn't really matter.

"You purred. On me," he contests, yes, against reality itself more than to his fluffy interlocutor. The worst part of all of this has nothing to do with the curse: the cat wasn't a stray that trusted him out of desperation; it was, and is, someone who knows him well and trusted him *despite it all.* Mockery, rivalry, betrayal, subjective disdain, and everything Dazai didn't do himself, but had just *allowed* to happen… none of that has been enough to smother whatever faith is making the mafioso act like this.

The detective drops to the floor, crossing his legs. The cat's… no, Chuuya's fur bristles and then settles before he takes a hesitant step, his paws silent on the floor; his whiskers brush against the fabric of Dazai's trousers. Then he scrambles back a few inches, ears flatten once again and his tail swings erratically behind him.

"I'll fix this," he murmurs, as his fingers stroke the soft fur between Chuuya's ears. "Be mindful though: I'm never letting you forget this. *Ever."*

Dickhead. What a shitty life sentence this is; but this is also the Dazai he knows. The promise of eternal mockery is a fragment of normalcy, soothing in its own way. Meanwhile, Dazai's nails are scratching under his chin. It's an irresistible burst of bliss and Chuuya leans into it: an implicit signature on a deal with the devil he knows.

On the other hand, next to the note, the two tins still linger.

They're right there.

Chuuya tries to ignore the thought and avoid looking at them. He fails.

The problem is that he remembers the taste, the desperate appreciation he savoured last night, and that's also why he bought them in the first place, when he was barefoot and striding across Yokohama in borrowed clothes. It's not urgent, they have bigger problems, don't they?

But the cans are there and he really wants some, but he cannot access them! He sits closer to the base of the cabinet, staring up; he lets out a meow, carefully nonchalant.

Dazai glances down with an arched brow. "Hm?"

Another meow, small, reluctant even; he paws at the cabinet once. Sharp yet tiny claws click against the wood; hell, even the sound itself comes out as *petulant* at best.

The cans, motherfucker. THE CANS!

Dazai's face shifts, his eyes narrow and then widen; when he speaks there's a laugh hiding in his voice: "Seriously?"

Regardless, the detective reaches for one of the cans. The tab pulls, the lid peels back; the scent floods the kitchen in a salty, rich caress and Chuuya's whole body vibrates.

The contents are split in two, between two identical shallow dishes. Of course Dazai's helping himself to a portion, what would stop him? Propriety? The fact that they have… other fish to fry? *Ah!* If the circumstances differed, Chuuya would comment, but at the moment he lacks the ability to speak and he's aware of how hypocritical that would be.

"Alright, let's go," he announces, holding both plates and walking towards the living room, expecting to be followed. "Don't say I never did anything for you!"

A breath, that's all, Chuuya stays put… is he really going to follow? Like a loyal little dog? It's a type of humiliation, clearly, mockery devised in the blink of an eye… but, the crab is going to the living room, not only the bastard. Yes, he's loyal to the meal, not to the man, *fuck it!* Chuuya lurches; the plate is there, on the floor, politely waiting for him near the couch.

A couple of muddy penny loafers have been discarded nearby, and the bastard is already sitting on the couch and looking unfairly at ease as he takes small bites off his own plate with a pair of chopsticks.

The crab is cold and just perfect, and Chuuya leaps at it: every bite sends a shiver of satisfaction down his spine. The purring is both unavoidable and shameless, mingling with the sound of each swallow in a hushed rhythm.

Four years apart, and this is their first shared meal… a can of crab. Half for the cat, half for the detective, with no condiments and no conversation.

There is also no pretence in sight, no deflection, both the meal and the goal are shared, for once. So, even if it is a pathetic one, it’s not such a bad reunion.

Time slips by, punctuated in bites, until both dishes are bare. The silence is broken by the click of a lighter: Dazai cups the flame even if they’re inside, out of habit; as such the cigarette dangling from his lips ignites with a spark.

When the acrid smell of smoke cuts through the lingering scent of crab, the cat's tiny pink nose wrinkles. He hadn’t noticed the detective reaching for the crumpled pack now resting on the sofa cushion. *Inside?!* The bastard is smoking inside!

Oblivious to this, Dazai leans back and exhales a thin stream of grey that drifts towards the ceiling. It’s not like Chuuya doesn’t understand the appeal, he smokes too, it’s a bad habit, but it’s also the scent of the mafia.

Ash flicks into the dish. *Do it in your own hand if you must! Not in my fucking dish.* Each flick of the detective’s wrist sends flakes tumbling into the ceramic, and Chuuya glares from below, simmering.

“A spoken truth,” Dazai mutters, his eyes on the ceiling; he exhales a thicker plume before he speaks again. “Or a love that’s true.”

“So, *spoken.* That requires intent, and it can’t be unimportant, because you must have had plenty of chances to give true answers,” he’s not speaking for the sake of getting a reply, because as they stand at the moment, Dazai will get none, but it’s a way like any other to think. “The truth must be something you don’t want to say, given the obvious clause that it must be you and not someone –”

Another flick. More ash tainting the plate. *I’m going to kill him.*

What should have been a death threat leaves him as a low growl that interrupts Dazai’s sentence.

“What?”

The bastard shoots a look at the dish, and then a quick one to the cat; the right corner of his mouth twitches. “Oh, sorry,” he starts, but his smirk widens. "Couldn't find anything different… and you have a dishwasher, so no, I’m not sorry.”

The audacity of this fucker. Chuuya’s ears flatten as he gathers his hind legs: the jump is a leap of spite, and he lands on the cushion next to Dazai. His fur is bristling and his tail is whipping back and forth. He swats at the air with a clawed paw, which supposedly is a threat of scratching Dazai’s eyes out. It’s very intimidating, if you ask him.

Instead, Dazai chuckles and his shoulders start shaking with silent laughter as he catches the paw mid-air with his free hand. His thumb tenderly brushes the soft pink pads, and Chuuya’s tantrum dissolves into tingles at the base of his own tail. *Fuck you, not fair, playing… dirty…*

“So, we were saying,” the detective resumes; his hand lands on the cushion. “The other one is a love that’s true, ‘a love’... that seems to imply that any love would do, even if curses are known for fetishizing the romantic kind. But what does count?” Dazai presses the cigarette into the empty dish. The cat watches the smoke curl upwards, but he doesn’t react: the fight is over and the couch is soft.

“Love is just… a lot of behaviours, consistent with a sentiment, made predictable by…” Not the best definition of the term that one can find, but it’s insight into how Dazai’s brain operates: when he gets lost, when the destination is clear but the path isn’t, what else is left to do if not ponder the key terms? Maybe, right there, a clue resides.

Chuuya doesn’t mean to leap, but he does so anyway and he ends up closing the distance and settling on the man’s lap; he tucks his head against the edge of the black waistcoat, looking up as if a mere look would be enough to communicate something even words would be insufficient for: an inane sense of trust, a spark of hope, a tiny self-assured plea… the man is undeniably a piece of shit, but if he focuses on this, then he’ll be able to make everything work, doesn’t matter how strong or how brilliant the enemy is.The problem with working with Dazai, as he and a certain four-eyed detective know, is having to battle with the man’s motivation to do shit; on the other hand, arguing over the odds of success is pointless. The equation, if one were to pry into a certain handwritten notebook, is something comparable to the following: “Convince the waste of bandages to stop lazying around = everything works out.”

For a moment nothing comes, just Dazai’s breath stuttering, then a big palm lands on the cat’s back, delivering delicate strokes.

“Yeah, we’ll figure it out.”

Chuuya’s paw stretches out and seeks the point on Dazai’s waist where the shirt, the waistcoat, the trousers, and the coat offer the perfect thickness for his claws; he presses down, claws catching through multiple weaves. The texture is satisfying, and he gives just a couple of pushes and pulls which suffice as the only type of answer he can convey, and it's an affirmative one for sure.

Outside the window, the city shifts and where the harbour meets the sea, the blurry lights of a ferry slowly slide across.

A love that’s true; Dazai circles back to it. Love is consistent with a sentiment, but here it’s a prerequisite: in order to be true, it has to be already present, which also implies that simply “feeling” the sentiment isn’t enough. So, the second option doesn’t differ much from the first; it still demands a revelation of sorts… it’s circular.

It’s a single and cruel option masquerading as two.

Mindlessly, his fingers move in an unconscious pattern, racing down the cat’s spine, reaching the base of his tail and then back up, again and again. Somehow the act is bolstering his reasoning, and Chuuya hasn’t mauled him yet, so he clearly doesn’t mind.

“Who’s the judge, though? ‘Truth’ and ‘true’, sure, but against what? Some universal standard? Where’s the cut off?” A humourless snort escapes him, and he shoots a glance at his interlocutor. “Love is just people acting like idiots and then justifying it after the fact. And what if you’re not reciprocated?” His voice is thinner now, worn out by how long the detective has been wandering the perimeter of each and every concept.

Perhaps that’s the reason behind the transformation: for how callous the terms are, turning a rageful mafioso into an objectively adorable cat doesn’t ensure reciprocation, yet it definitely aids it a bit.

With such a premise, the other party has to be a cat-person. Which makes one wonder if there’s a specific target besides the mafioso, which, in turn, brings forth the matter of how such a piece of information has been acquired.

This is yet another dead end of many, no, he has to conceive a different solution, but what?

Beneath his hand, Chuuya is *oh-so-soft* as he leans into the contact.

Curse. Fucking. Important. Keep up. Chuuya should be focusing. The bastard is talking, he’s mulling things over, this is…

The curse, they have to break the curse, he cannot spend the rest of his life turning into *this.*

The fucking curse…

But his eyelids are made heavy by the voice above him: it has a well-known rhythm, and the words degrade into mere sounds, morphing into a lullaby. His paws twitch once before going slack against the fabric, and then he’s gone.

Just a boneless, tiny ball of fur.

The weight on Dazai’s lap deepens, though his senses fail to report it.

“And what if I asked you questions? And you answered? A meow for yes, silence for no? Could we pry the truth out of you? Would it count as *spoken*?”

Shush! The cat is dead to the world: snout tucked from sight, front limbs outstretched whilst the rest of his body curls tight.

“Maybe it’d count, but you’re asleep, aren’t you.”

No answer, obviously: Chuuya’s out, a useless loaf of copper fur. His tiny exhales are relaxed and slow, small puffs against Dazai’s black waistcoat. The sight affects in a way that doesn’t even generate a thought, it lingers right below where a thought would surface: a soft pang, somewhere amidst his ribcage, the uncomfortable caprice of tenderness.

With a uselessly performative sigh for a man with no awake witnesses, Dazai shrugs off his coat, one sleeve at a time just to avoid jostling the tiny passenger. The gabardine slithers down his arms and pools on the sofa. He stands fluidly, with one hand sliding under the small body on his lap with ease, given that the weight is insignificant. Chuuya’s body moulds itself

to his hand; his head lolls and his muzzle parts just enough for the tip of a pink tongue to peek through. Briefly, his back legs dangle before instinct bends them inwards: he's a loose ring of fur.

Eh, it's more like an orange *botamochi*, with whiskers. A very dangerous one, for sure, but a mochi nonetheless.

The bedroom door is ajar, and Dazai nudges it wider with his hip to step inside. He bends at the edge of the bed with a relatively simple plan: deposit the cargo here, tuck him in and go back to thinking. For one very optimistic second the plan is working.

A snag.

One paw is still hooked into the fabric of his waistcoat, with tiny needle-like claws caught between the threads. Dazai tugs experimentally, and, of course, the grip tightens in a sleepy reflex of toes, and the points bury themselves even deeper.

He tries again; careful and spidery fingers try to dislodge each toe, one by one, but every adjustment draws small sounds of protest from the sleeping ball of fur. As if separation is unacceptable.

"Oi," he tries, his voice barely a whisper, but it's a fruitless attempt. He tugs for the last time, slightly more forcefully, and all he gets in return is a loud mewl one could easily interpret as a '*Don't you fucking dare.*'

There's plenty of options available: he could wake Chuuya up with a flick, or maybe he could unbutton the waistcoat… Instead, he quickly surrenders to the feline's will; don't judge him, he's been running in circles around the lexicon of the curse, without any feedback, for who knows how long.

He lies down.

The mattress is firm against his side, and Chuuya adjusts comfortably against his stomach. Mr. Cat has clearly made its choice, so one might as well just adapt: the bolo tie is the first thing to go, since it digs uncomfortably into his clavicle in this position; he unfastens it with a flick and sets it on the nearby pillow. He pops open two buttons at the collar, freeing his throat.

Answers don't find themselves, but the note can wait. There's little Dazai can do on his own, without being able to communicate with the mafioso who wears the curse in the first place. Yes, knowing when to take a break is a virtue, or so someone would say. Definitely not Kunikida.

The dark does something insidious to people: it provides plausible deniability. It's not a real thing, you're still responsible for whatever you say in the depths of the night, but this delusion is an ordinary malfunction of the human species. For how detached this bandaged man might feel from the concept of humanity as a whole, he's not immune.

Here, with the city glow banished by the thick curtains, everything is muted; the only thing brushing at the edge of his senses is a faint rumble: Chuuya's purring again. His hand finds its way back to the velvety fur, right between those bat-like ears.

The ears are a bit too big, aren't they? And so is the head. Even in this form, Chuuya's proportions are a bit odd; he's akin to a juvenile, at that awkward stage when the rest of the body has yet to catch up with an oversized head.

Regardless, it's just a cat.

And a sleeping one at that.

This notion, albeit incorrect, is enough to open the gates.

"You were," Dazai starts, without knowing where his sentence is going but his voice is pitched low. "You were *nice* to have around, as a cat."

Chuuya doesn't stir; he cannot be a witness to this atrocious sincerity, there is no consciousness present between those ears. Perfect.

"I didn't even know I could *want* to take care of something, and then a mangy orange idiot found me." By technicality the opposite would be true, but it's a matter of what it felt like to Dazai himself. "I checked the cabinets, in the morning, like an idiot, like you were hiding behind a jug of laundry detergent, for whatever reason."

A shaky exhale dares to interrupt his monologue; his throat feels dry, a notion trying to escape him, an easy thing for other people to say, but not for him. He would do it theatrically, if there were witnesses.

But Chuuya is out.

"I was upset, okay?! About a cat, of all things. You were on my chest when I fell asleep, and then when I woke up you were gone, and I…" He's accusing a cat of abandonment; except it's not a cat, it's the smaller half of *Double Black*, who must have been horrified and disoriented by whatever was happening to his own body. He couldn't waste time playing house pet for him, Dazai knows it. The logic is sound, yet the loss felt real, and it still does to some degree.

It's stupid and selfish, but perhaps Dazai is both of those things.

"I know it sounds insane," he corrects himself under his breath. His jaw tightens a fraction, but the bed is warm, the cat is still purring in his sleep, so the temporary strain dissipates in an exhale. Against the back of his neck, the pillowcase is cool, which further slackens his muscles.

"Then… oh, I've been texted by a cat.. this is why–" The fingers of his free hand, resting on the cotton above his chest, twitch.

His words are rushing towards a destination he's not ready for, but he doesn't find it in himself to stop talking.

“It’s normal for a soaking wet cat to show some gratitude to the cretin who dried him off. It's polite feline behaviour. Instead it was *you.*…”

A motion brushes against his stomach, and Dazai’s sentence fades. Chuuya is unconsciously shifting, a repositioning made by tiny stretches: his head nudges upwards and upwards, past the edge of the waistcoat, burrowing through the open collar.

Oh no.

A tiny nose presses into Dazai’s bare skin, it’s cool and slightly damp, settled against the notch of his clavicle.

“You trust like a fool, you did it when we were teens. Then again, last night… and you did it when you texted me. You should want nothing to do with me. What the *hell* is wrong with you, Chuuya?” His voice is barely audible, a surprisingly timid whisper for such cruelty.

“Despite everything we’ve done to each other, and everything we might still do… it’s not bad, isn’t it?”

His hands cage the back of the cat’s skull, cradling it with a thumb on either side; maybe he can protect someone he never thought needed it, for once, if only for this fleeting moment.

“I’m just glad it…” A yawn interrupts him, his jaw cracking. It’s been a day for him too, even if nothing consequential really happened.

“...glad it was…”another attempt, but this time the words blend into a sigh. His blinks grow longer, stretching until one of them lingers long enough to lock.

“...you.”

His lips remain involuntarily parted, so this last sentence is left perfectly complete in its paucity.

It seems Dazai will sleep well for the second night in a row.

Chapter End Notes

So, overall this one, chapter 3, has been the worst one of them all, at least to write. Even if I've posted it, I'm still unsure about it. I might have been a bit too mean to it, but as it still stands now it feels very repetitive to me, but at this point I'm out of energy to continue editing it again and again. It's definitely my least favourite of them all, so far, and I favour the last chapter way more.
Speaking of the final chapter, I'm glad to announce that it's not merely in the works, but it's almost ready! It currently stands in the early stages of editing, but I'm more satisfied

with that one (if compared to the one above here), so it shouldn't require more than another couple of hours of work.
I'm planning on posting it either tomorrow evening or the day after tomorrow.
For now, that's all, I hope that despite its many faults, this chapter was enjoyable enough for you. (Also, this is my first time using the script for gdoc, instead of formatting manually, so if there's something weird, formatting-wise, pls lmk!)
Every comment makes my day, so I'd welcome each and every one of them!
°. .

Chapter 4: A spoken truth, a love that’s true.

Chapter Notes

> So, here we are. I didn’t plan for this fic to be this long, so I ended up with my longest fanfiction to date without even noticing. Thank you so much for following these two idiots to the end!
> I hope the ending feels earned.
> (Editing was a bit limited due to time constraints and... I'm just exhausted lately, so please, don't let me know, typos can live and fester, let them be).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What the fuck is wrong with my legs; here it is, the specific thought Chuuya wakes up to: there’s no light intruding by the window, or consciousness gently coming online… none of that crap. Nobody really wakes up to those things, we’re all brought back to life by our bodies and their tyranny.

Unsurprisingly, all of his joints ache: wide and clumsy, bearing an intolerably muscular physique.

Both of his arms are contorted, folded between his body and *something;* his fingers are awkwardly elongated and they’re gripping some dense fabric.

Obviously, his sofa is sumptuous, capable of accommodating multiple people, and yet, for once, it feels dramatically small.

Small?

Or is he just trapped against something? His hand, the one clutching something, gives a tentative squeeze and it’s met by something sturdy and almost bony, right beneath the fabric.

Is he holding onto one of the back pillows?

He wiggles his fingers, experimentally, and the digits manage to push past one layer, and then another… just to be met with yet another different texture: slightly rough and way too warm: bandages.

Eh?!

This is not the couch.

And he’s definitely not touching a pillow.

Nope, fuck, not a pillow. Chuuya's exploratory mission is aborted; he throws his weight towards the far edge of the mattress, but he makes very little progress in his escape before something snares his nape.

Someone's fingers are tangled with the copper hair at the base of his skull; the grip itself is almost frantic, coiled tight just to prevent him from leaving.

Osamu fucking Dazai is in his bed.

And to add insult to injury, the hold Chuuya's ensnared in is not comforting, but the heel of the palm is seated oh-so-*right* that his spine almost curves into it. Almost, mind you.

Should he rip his own hair out? Tempting, but no, that ain't gonna happen. What about shouting at the top of his lungs? Or kneeing the bastard in the groin, it should be at perfect height…

Of course, Chuuya does none of that, but he reaches back, leashed to the sleeping detective by his own hair. Carefully, he starts peeling those fingers away; some come loose easily, but one catches on a knot and Chuuya has to work free with his thumbnail.

When, finally, also the thumb is removed, the mafioso is breathing hard, but he's doing so quietly and through his nose. His hold lingers on Dazai's wrist, just for a second.

He's letting go now, at this instant.

Instead he doesn't drop it, he just shifts his grip down before pressing his palm flat against Dazai's.

Time does its job well, at least on other people, doesn't it? At fifteen, sixteen, seventeen even… their hands had been near-matches, Dazai's fingers were longer but his palm was thinner, whilst Chuuya's were shorter but broader. Nobody could take the win, it was a *draw.*

The draw is over now, and it cannot be denied when the proof is right in front of him: the bastard's hand swallows his, overshooting Chuuya's by an entire knuckle and the palm is unfortunately wider by a thumb's width. His only advantage is lost.

Oh, these fingers can *reach into places.…*

Fuck no! He drops it fast, letting it land onto the mattress. For good measure he shoves his own hand under his cheek, caging it to stop it from going back.

Chuuya's going to kill him.

He's going to fix the fucking curse *himself,* and then kill him.

The detective's face is slack, his throat is deliciously vulnerable given the unfastened buttons. Perhaps a wiser man would exploit the moment, freeing both himself and the organisation from the most annoying thorn in their side.

Chuuya, clearly, has no wisdom to speak of: there's still warmth lingering on his exposed skin, a reminder of safety clinging to him, impossible to shake off.

Maybe not today, motherfucker.

"Lazy piece of shit."

This sharp insult trails behind the anger by several seconds, so it arrives wrong: his voice is too hoarse and soft, devoid of the violence he clearly intended. It's all due to the fact that the words were shaped by a mouth that has yet to remember what talking is. It's not like he's trying not to wake Dazai up, don't be stupid.

Chuuya is… strategising, throwing whispered insults at a sleeping man.

At his side, Dazai's bony fingers twitch in his sleep: once, just once, reaching for a tiny shape that's clearly not in his grasp anymore. How dare he be so–

No, Chuuya is categorically *not* finishing that thought.

A small mercy: they're both atop the blanket, so he can make his escape without having to untangle himself from the sheets.

Gently, the fresh autumnal air bites his arse. Oh, true… he's in the nude.

Maybe Chuuya should have figured it out earlier, he has already done this, the whole 'dawn makes man' or whatever the line was… but the fog of a humiliatingly good night of sleep takes its time to release one's brain.

With no grace he manages to roll off the bed, but what matters is that he does so very quietly. He should wake him up, grab Dazai by the ankle and throw him out, change the code, and salt the threshold for good measure.

He simply pads towards the bathroom on the tips of his toes instead.

At the sink, he cups the cold water and holds his face in it for the span of a blink, just to bring himself back to this plane of existence and wash the drool away from the corner of his mouth. He watches the water drain with vacant eyes; a fine, and long copper hair pirouettes before vanishing.

A wardrobe sits in the hall, he pulls a pair of burgundy tracksuit bottoms out of the top drawer, and a black tank top from the second one. It's just the bare minimum not to be buck-naked with a *guest* in the flat.

Striding through the living room, he's greeted by the acrid smell of smoke mingling with the oily crab residue. Two shallow plates, one on the floor and another on the couch; the latter one holds a pair of chopsticks and one cigarette, stubbed out right in the centre. Disgusting.

Rage should be what he feels, and part of him is; he'd been furious last night too, yet somewhere, beneath the fur and the anger, there had been another thought. A thought, well, whatever passes as such when one's skull is more snout than cranium. Albeit degraded and

ephemeral back then, the thought resurfaces as a proper list of statements now, as he picks up the plates: Dazai still smokes; it's a tough habit to break; he was more theatrical about it back then, using the cancer sticks as a prop to make himself look older; now it's just a habit, careless, casual… worse.

In theory there is nothing appealing in such a thing, but it speaks of familiarity, of something Dazai couldn't shed like he did with the black coat of his youth.

What pierces through the irritation, simmering underneath the veneer, is definitely dumber: Dazai, bringing the filter to his mouth and pulling, the ember igniting, the smoke leaving his parted lips…

Oh, Chuuya gets it.

The charm of a brooding tall man smoking, it's a cheap cliché; *hell*, it's a stereotype Chuuya himself falls under. Well, minus the tall part, but who the fuck would have the guts to point that out.

Regardless, his dick is clearly not getting the memo about the banality of it. Getting worked up over the *memory* of a cigarette, another fantastic new low for Nakahara Chuuya! Turns out, Dazai doesn't even have to be awake to ruin his morning.

Dropping both plates in the sink is a mindless act, but he doesn't rinse them given that doing so requires plucking the stubbed cigarette off the plate, and he's not doing that. His focus shifts to the rice cooker; he dumps the grains inside, and it's just around the third wash that his brain supplies the notion that… he's making a rather excessive amount. More than his usual breakfast. It looks annoyingly like he's making breakfast for two.

A couple of moments later, when the eggs hit the sizzling oil with an angry crackle, yet another thought sticks to his brain. In retrospect, maybe he should have contacted someone else, anyone else. It's not like Dazai solved shit, after all. Worse, the detective's great strategy had been: feed the cat, smoke a cigarette, pass out on someone else's bed.

Clearly a man for the job.

But he had shown up, hadn't he? Nobody forced the bastard to come, it'd been his choice. Ignoring Chuuya's texts would have been wise, maybe, and no consequences would have come his way, except the delight of, once again, disappointing the mafioso. Maybe Dazai could have even regarded that as a positive, a way like any other to torture him… and yet he didn't.

It shouldn't matter, because nothing got effectively solved. Nevertheless, there's warmth crawling up his skin, unrelated to the cooking: it's the bizarre relief of being listened to by someone who had no reason to do so.

"Useless waste of space," he muses with an uncharacteristically tender voice, through the curve of a smile. Chuuya doesn't catch himself, he doesn't stop it: there are no witnesses, no need for any artifice. Sure, he's not as disingenuous in the act of living as the bastard is, but

control has always been a necessity: the restraint necessary not to fly people out of windows, even when they deserved it.

Plating the food well is unnecessary, but Chuuya still does it: rice and eggs happily cohabit on a round plate, without intruding on each other's spaces, and the miso soup is carefully poured in a tiny bowl. Two of everything get placed on the side of the counter facing the tall stools, in the spot where the morning light is the kindest.

From the bedroom the rustle of fabric comes, accompanied by a groan; a hitch runs through the mafioso's shoulders at the sound. Okay, the bastard's awake, no biggie, he ain't meant to do bugger all about that.

Dazai appears in the doorway, dragging himself like a lively corpse. He has shed his waistcoat at some point, and he's currently leaning against the doorframe in just his shirt and trousers. Much could be said, much should be acknowledged, but what escapes the detective is only a groggy rasp: "Oh, you're human again."

"Groundbreakin', I know. Try not to sound disappointed." Chuuya aligns the second bowl, just a fraction to the left, centring it on the table, just to do something.

"So, my cat made me rice?" The nearby stool creaks under new weight as Dazai sits down. It's not the wisest thing to say, but god if it's the easiest.

"Don't ya fuckin' call me that!" A spatula clatters into the sink, louder than intended, haphazardly thrown. "And I made rice, for myself."

"Two bowls, for yourself."

Chuuya's mouth opens, but no believable explanation lies within his reach; heat crawls up his face and ears, involuntarily and most certainly visible. Still without saying a thing he strides closer, sitting down on the other stool. The ginger stays put just for a moment, an instant in which the sparkly morning light of a brand new day shines on them.

"A'ight, fuck, you showed up, didn't do jack shit, but it helped, so now ya get grub. Choke on it," Chuuya is staring at the bowls, refusing to look at him by mere force of will.

"Hm." Of course the bandaged detective doesn't have much more to say. If it were another deception, then it's a perfect opportunity for mockery. It's not deception though, it's *something true*, and he has no strategy for it. So, Dazai's fingers tip-tap on the table for a brief moment, before he comes up with: "Is there no coffee?"

"Shit."

So, this deflection can be protracted; it's a coward's tactic, but Dazai reaches for the coffee machine regardless. He pats the counter uselessly, like an idiot. Where do people put coffee? Usually nearby, but Chuuya is vertically challenged so maybe not the upper cabinets, or maybe he uses his ability… fine. Defeated, Dazai gives him a look: just his eyes and one hand doing a little wave. It's a question.

The answer is as mute as the query was, Chuuya finds himself pointing at the cabinet where the coffee pods reside. Here they are, back at it again, after four years, moronically communicating without making a sound.

It used to be reserved for moves on the battleground, when a sound could prove deadly. Now it's being employed for making coffee.

The bastard needs mugs too. With a sigh of pretended frustration, the ginger is on his feet. A moment later something small pressed against Dazai's front: Chuuya's found a way to split past the tall man in front of the machine, squeezing himself nimbly between Dazai and the counter. Of all possible things he could do, this is it.

The cabinet opens, the mafioso's fingertips find a mug, slide one to the edge and then another.

Dazai might have stopped breathing. No, his breath is *definitely* caught in his throat. Maybe that's the problem, the problem they've always faced when in each other's presence with a lack of a specific threat in front of them: thinking becomes a bit too onerous.

Better be idiots instead.

For a moment, frozen on the spot, Chuuya lingers, clutching the mugs to his chest, before slamming them both on the counter. His retreat is a pathetically fast one, and he's back in front of the food, sitting down hard with his face burning.

One pod. Two pods. A fancy machine nobody sane would allow Dazai to operate: these are the things he should be focusing on, as his fingers shakily peel away the pods' seals. Coffee, he wanted coffee, not to learn that the top of Chuuya's head is level with his own chin.

He slides one pod in.

For a moment the other man seems so *small*; not weak, but…

Slide one mug in, press the button. Wait.

Small is an insufficient adjective, as tiny would be. Yet he mustn't conjure anything more precise, no.

One done, another to go. Pod, button, waiting.

The detective doesn't turn, he just stares at the coffee maker and keeps pressing the button with a trembling hand: Chuuya just fits right there, against his chest, under his chin. Dazai already *knew* that he would.

It is, after all, something any straight man would indulge in, after a brief mission shared and won against all odds: how the deepening of their size difference would impact their eventual yet improbable proximity. Wait, is it? Of course it isn't, otherwise the tips of Dazai's ears wouldn't be pink.

At least, as he turns with two mugs in his hands, he's greeted by the sight of a freckled tomato. He should comment on it, it's a taunt served on a silver platter, but he doesn't: Dazai simply sits down, without a sound.

Neither of them touches the food, not right away at least. Chuuya breaks the silence first, by stabbing a piece of egg and shoving it in his mouth, almost as if by keeping it busy he might avoid saying what he's about to. "So, why'd you come?" Indeed, the egg hasn't been effective.

Dazai tilts his head, he's cradling the coffee mug with both hands; the steam curls upwards.

"Didn't know ya did shit for free, and yet;" Chuuya continues, without looking up from his plate.

"Maybe I just wanted to see you suffer," he finally answers, before bringing the mug to his lips and lazily blowing across the surface.

"Bull-fucking-shit." He points at Dazai with his chopsticks; the task at hand, eating, is suddenly forgotten.

The detective shrugs, with only one shoulder. It's a safe charade, but it's a short-lived one: "You said please." Finally he allows himself a sip of coffee. "I couldn't help it."

Somewhere, on the street below them, a horn shrieks.

"Why me?" This is something Dazai shouldn't ask, but he does it anyway: it's time for him to go on the offensive too, after all.

"Dunno."

"I'm the last person you should trust," he adds. It's undeniable enough for Dazai to weaponise his own failings against someone else. Chuuya could have called anyone else, and yet he opted for the traitor, the one person in Yokohama whom…

"I didn't trust shit, I was desperate," the mafioso blurts out in response, before stuffing his face with rice and washing it down with caffeine.

"Isn't it the same thing? With us?"

"Shut. Yer. Trap."

It works! Surprisingly, they eat in silence: the coffee goes down in tiny sips. When all plates have been cleaned, Dazai, neither looking nor asking, reaches into his trouser pocket to pull out a cigarette packet. He's tapping one out for himself when the mafioso's hand intercepts it, plucking it straight from the pack. It's a shitty brand, of a packet belonging to a shitty mackerel, but today he is in the mood for it.

Dazai watches the flame catch as it gets ignited. Then he starts laughing: the onset is but a giggle, but it builds and builds until his shoulders are shaking.

“The fuck?!” comes out in a plume of smoke.

“You had–” Dazai takes a bigger breath before resuming, trying to keep yet another laugh at bay. “For two nights, you had claws!” He wipes a tear from the corner of his eye, yet a smile sticks to his lips even then. “You didn’t even scratch me once! You’re so amenable as a cat.” Another pause, a shaky breath. “You’re so amenable as a cat, you should consider it. You must also hate me way less when you’re purring…” The plan isn’t to tease Chuuya about the curse, but it’s not not… there is no plan, not this early in the morning at least.

“I don’t hate you.”

It slips out between Chuuya’s teeth, escaping out of him in a rush. Before Dazai can say or ask anything else, the mafioso is already moving; he stands up, he furiously gathers all plates and mugs in reach and he bolts.

The sink is, surprisingly, the safest corner of the kitchen right now. The water runs, and the ginger doesn’t turn around, like one would after shattering something precious.

As if avoidance could simply rewind time and shelter someone from consequences.

Behind him, after some rushed steps, nothing. Nothing at all. Chuuya is left on his own, in the company of the plates. His jaw is clenched; he said it out loud, to the bastard’s face.

In the sink, his knuckles redden under the hot water as he scrubs at a plate he’s already washed once. If his hands are shaking, and they are, they might as well be shaking productively.

Those four words aren’t bad per se, no, the problem is that Dazai hasn’t been smug… so he wasn’t expecting them. So he must have believed, until now, that the contrary was true. A valid assumption, really, especially after Dazai’s deflection… and yet, that revelation has always been unspoken before that night. It’s Dazai’s problem if he’s stupid enough to not have paid attention to the unspoken.

Chuuya’s throat feels tight. He still fucked up, even if everything above was correct, he still said it. He turns off the tap, and after it drips once, the silence returns.

A soft whoosh from the living room. Oh, he knows what’s happening, yet Chuuya goes to investigate regardless, dishcloth clenched tight by his left hand.

He makes his way to the living room just to find the source, and here he is: Dazai is on the floor.

Shoulder to spine, to shoulder, to spine: he’s rolling in an endless slow tumble across the carpet, like an overgrown log caught in the Ōoka river.

One full rotation, then two, then three. Brown hair fans out and flattens at each rotation, and Dazai himself doesn’t acknowledge Chuuya’s stare. They both know what’s going on, even if the detective looks absolutely deranged.

“On my fucking carpet? Are you five?!”

“Five and a half, at least.” For a moment the rolling stops, Dazai lies on his back, one arm flung across his chest. He clearly needs to think, of course, but he’s not pondering the curse. Not even remotely. Back to tumbling he goes.

Chuuya watches this familiar view for a stupidly long time: a roll, a pause, when Dazai’s momentum dies, he gives himself a little push with either one foot or the other, and the incessant motion has started to unravel the bandages at his ankles. They trail behind him.

“Oi, Dazai.”

Nothing, just another repetition.

“Osamu.”

Oh, that works, stopping the detective from his little… well, whatever this is. Rolling onto his back again, he finally turns his gaze to the shorter man.

“Tonight, when it happens again…” Chuuya’s voice is almost unlike himself, thin and uncertain. His hands are toying with the dishcloth, folding it and unfolding it. “You’ll take care of the cat, right? Don’t let it become roadkill or somethin’.”

Quietness lingers for a moment too long, and the mafioso’s pulse jumps. He should have worded it more flippantly, why is he even relying on this piece of shit?! Fuck him! The dishcloth flies straight and it lands, warm and wet, squarely over Dazai’s face.

“Sure,” comes the reply, muffled by the fabric, and yet it arrives. “I’ll take care of *you.*”

Deliberation hasn’t forged the wording, it just is, it is a fact. A long exhale escapes Chuuya’s lips as he crouches, and the anger dissipates with it. Lifting the cloth he finds a grin waiting for him, wide, a bit shameless even.

What an idiot.

“Then, maybe, it’s gonna be alright.” That’s it, the conclusion Chuuya’s reached, with very little proof and almost no wisdom.

It’s true though, isn’t it? That shit-eating grin on Dazai’s face has always meant this: that things will be alright. Pain might come, it won’t be easy, but yeah, it’ll be alright.

In the sky, the sun is halfway to giving up as Dazai comes through the door of Chuuya’s flat, and he’s already talking. “I might have spent forty minutes at the pet shop, you wouldn’t guess the variety of cat toys available! Yet the variety of colours is not for the pets, it’s for the owners, because felines have a restricted colour-range…”

He finds Chuuya in the kitchen, back turned to the entrance with tense shoulders and not a single sound. It’s a warning sign Dazai immediately dismisses on the following premises: anyone would be pissed about turning into a cat in a quarter of an hour, and Chuuya even more than the general population, since being pissed off is his default state.

Instead, Dazai sets a couple of heavy plastic bags on the counter. “Behold!”

A feather wand, a comb, catnip, a small ceramic dish and… a collar, black leather. It dangles and jingles as elongated fingers pluck it out.

The mafioso's free hand closes around it mid-swing, whilst the other lingers, clenched around something, at his side.

"There's a bell," Dazai adds, taking a cautionary step back. Purchasing the collar was a fit of impulse, much more than the rest of the, admittedly unnecessary, items. Being in a store, with some yen not belonging to him, and with the ghost of a fantasy behind his eyelids… that's how his purchases came to be. The other bag housed a fillet of Ōma tuna, ready to be cut in tiny cat-sized bites.

Unnecessary, but hopeful. Hopeful of what? That the curse wouldn't break? This is not making the best of the circumstances, but rather a selfish little desire of being on the receiving end of purring affection.

"Put that bell on me an' they're draggin' the bay for you by Friday. They'll find the bell up your arse."

"Oh, come on, it's not that different from your…"

"FRIDAY." Per usual, anger is a wonderful source of courage, and with enough of it igniting his chest, Chuuya allows himself a deeper breath. He's there, almost about to say something.

He doesn't say anything, which is a second and much more damning sign.

Leather-clad fingers unravel, holding out the note for a split second, ready for the taking.

It's warm when Dazai holds it, almost as if someone spent the whole afternoon strangling it. Only one line persists… no, it's half a line: '*Man again.*'

Even the comma has vanished, with a dot in its stead.

'*[...] on one of two:*

Spoken truth. A love that's true.'

Even if the two conditions are currently absent, Dazai's brain recalls them with minimal effort. 'One of' suggests that a proper truth would suffice, and tracing it back to today's morning is all but difficult. A simple admission of not hating his guts.

Case closed?

Isn't it a bit too easy? Nothing is ever that simple, but maybe it is, this once, just this once, no? Hilariously, a chime is the thing that contradicts this way of thinking: Chuuya's other hand is still holding the collar: the black leather of his gloves creaks as he loops it through his grip, and the bell gives a thin, bright sound before he silences it with his thumb.

He releases it again, allowing it another strangled chime. He presses again.

Alert brown eyes watch the collar turn again, and again.

The question is *which one*, and the answer should be obvious. But Chuuya's averting his gaze, maybe for the first time in forever he's not barging through with the foolish confidence that always permeates each and every breath of his.

So he doesn't know.

And if he doesn't know…

The bell chimes more loudly.

Dazai's brows furrow; he's impossibly still, but this is stillness that's not sprouting from calm. His breath is thin, and his eyes dart here now, there the next second, and back to Chuuya they go.

The point, as convoluted as it might seem, is that if the mafioso doesn't know, it implies that he cannot *rule it out.* That is damning enough.

"Oi, the fuck are ya' starin' at." The collar swings in the shorter man's hand, his agitation sloshing over, albeit still caught between '*I don't hate you'* and whatever it actually meant.

"You don't know which one it is, do you?" The smallest possible act of courage, from the one of them less inclined to valour.

No more chimes, nothing moves for a breath, like a photograph depicting a pivotal second. There's gonna be a before this instant and an after, starkly parted by a single line: moments like this one define people, severing what was from what it will be.

"It doesn't matter," Chuuya growls, caving to a tactic unbecoming of him.

"That's not an answer."

"Who said I'm givin'ya one?!"

Impasses like this one are rare for them, and an escalation is neither clear nor advisable. Turning and heading out would be the most painless choice, but Dazai steps forward. It's just a couple of slow steps, each one deliberate and aimed at…

The edge of the kitchen island digs into Chuuya's lower back; he's trapping himself by relying on flawed instinct. A misstep like this one would be one's final choice; the realisation sinks in when Dazai's bandaged palms, both of them, as mean as their owner, settle onto the marble. Long arms are caging his torso, without touching: a web of potential nullification.

"I could still hurl ya into the harbour from here," Chuuya threatens, his voice low and surprisingly serious, the last growl of a wild dog about to gnaw at its bars.

"Yeah, I'm aware," Dazai's voice is obscenely calm.

“If you don’t back off at this fucking instant I’ll…” No, that’s not it, Chuuya’s not the type to talk this much before unleashing gravity on someone’s arse.

“What?”

“Fuck if I know! SOME DUMB SHIT!”

Dazai moves with a huff of laughter, lowering his head until his mouth is level with Chuuya’s ear, the tip of his nose brushing copper curls.

“Then do some dumb shit, I’m not judging,” the detective muses, voice as light as the chime had been moments ago.

The collar hits the floor; Dazai’s eyes drop to it, to the space between their bodies, before snapping back up. Leather gloves land on the counter after being jerkily tugged off.

Bare hands are part of a specific choreography, one the bandaged man has never been on the receiving end of. Until now. The thought drains blood away from his face, because, come on, that’s not a painless death.

Chuuya’s hands are on him, flat against his sternum, fingers splayed. One of them races up, surpassing Dazai’s collarbone, up towards his throat: it curls around the side of his neck.

The hold doesn’t tighten, Chuuya’s thumb traces small circles, back and forth right under his jaw.

“You’re not strangling me,” Dazai observes, faintly.

“M’workin’ on it,” Chuuya’s answer is a mumble, since he mashed his face into the taller man’s shoulder in the meantime. His other hand descends and hooks into Dazai’s belt, tugging him forwards until there’s no space left.

The bastard’s long arms don’t know what to do, they’re a bit useless, hanging there.

“Yer slow, shitty Dazai.”

“Eh?” Within the span of that query, with a rather noticeable delay, the not-so-great detective grapples with his surroundings well enough to just… hug him back.

They’re both very fucking bad at this, there’s no grace in this tangle, the angles are wrong and, from the outside, they’re just collapsing on each other with the aid of a kitchen counter.

But they’re doing it!

Dazai’s long fingers find Chuuya’s lower back, lying flat and still against a curve he’d eventually feel without any fabrics in the way.

Chuuya’s face tilts and burrows further until a scratch of stubble grazes his temple. It’s not surprising per se, laziness paired up with adulthood often produces it, and it clearly took the detective a couple of days of neglect to get there, but still… it’s a brand new discovery.

Four years change many things, don't they? Or perhaps Chuuya's just never got close enough before.

"The tuna," Dazai says, eventually, after the warm hues of the sunset have already sneaked into the kitchen. "For dinner."

"Uh uh."

"Is it?"

The ginger lifts his head, his freckled cheeks blotchy, and the following query escapes a pout: "Is it what?"

"A date, maybe," Dazai delicately shoots back.

Chuuya squints and glares at him from below, hunting down any spark of mockery. Everything could still be a trap; the wariness is still mutual. Regardless, there's nothing to be found, just a fragile offering. "Get the fish, Dazai."

"Is that a yes?!"

"It's a 'get the fuckin' fish before I change my mind about all of this shit."

It's after they've detangled from that embrace and the rustle of hands digging into a plastic bag fills the silence, only then is a soft and almost inaudible answer voiced: "Yes."

As the last sliver of sunlight retreats, Chuuya barely notices: he remains stubbornly human, and he's too busy grating some fresh ginger to notice. Against all odds, the curse seems to be satisfied.

To his left, Dazai is rhythmically decimating some spring onion; the kitchen knife flashes in his grip, exuding lethality at every motion yet the outcome, when Chuuya scrapes it into a bowl, is anything but graceful: big chunks coexist with minced ones. "Congrats, idiot, you assassinated it successfully," the mafioso scoffs, bumping the taller man aside with his hip, freeing the space just to pour some soy sauce into the bowl.

A half-hour later, the delicate smell of *tuna tataki* lingers in the air, a bottle of wine has been uncorked and they're sitting shoulder to shoulder on the tall stools. The kitchen is a mess, and the quiet clatter of chopsticks is the only sound daring to taint the silence.

"Why ain't ya runnin' your mouth? S'what you do." Chuuya mutters, nudging a piece of tuna through the sauce.

"Mm." The wine swirls in Dazai's glass, it's a surprisingly elegant way of fidgeting. "You know I'm… I did… well, I know plenty of things."

"How eloquent of the great Osamu Dazai." The ginger props his chin on his fist; it's satisfactory to witness Dazai stumbling on his own words.

"Shush, I'm attempting honesty."

“Oh, this oughta be good.”

The best way to say it is, surprisingly, the simplest way. Regardless, simplicity takes guts, or wine, and whilst the latter is available its support is insufficient. A gulp precedes Dazai’s words: “I don’t exactly know what we’re doing here, but I should inform you that I’ve never been with a man, so…”

Of all things, this is not exactly relevant, nor the worst obstacle that would threaten two men who have never experienced romance longer than a bad hangover. This is their first chance to fail at something slowly; doing so explosively is not inevitable, for once. Only time will tell, and of all the things that ought to be tackled, this one, the most practical of them all, is the easiest.

Chuuya’s lips pluck tightly, swallowing a laugh that makes his shoulders shake anyway: he’s waited years to hear the bastard admit that he might not be the best at something! “Huh, ‘fraid you can’t deliver?!”

“Maybe…”

That single word is enough for the mafioso to slam the brakes, okay, it’s time to cut the taunting short, this conversation is genuine. Fuck, he’s not used to it, not with Dazai at least. “Not even the mafia could keep count of how many women you stuck your dick into,” he says, flatly, eyes fixed on the last piece of tuna. “You’d do just fine.”

A myriad of different reassurances would have been better, but that’s what lands between the two of them.

“Would I…” Dazai muses through a crooked smirk; one brow audaciously lifts atop half-lidded eyes which are recklessly fixated on Chuuya’s lips.

That specific tone, soaking in amusement, doesn’t evoke the usual annoyance… the taunt it contains is rather inviting, after all. Regardless, a flush climbs the ginger’s throat; this is what you get when you show the bastard mercy: it immediately gets weaponised. He’ll definitely do just fine.

Nimble chopsticks spear the final piece of tuna and shove it straight past Dazai’s lips, pressing the wood against his teeth until he relents.

Peak romance, really, a man force-feeding his partner some fish to prevent him from being hot on purpose.

“Stop doin’ that.”

Dazai chews slowly, and after swallowing his tongue darts towards the corner of his lip, catching a stray drop of soy sauce with deliberate laziness. “Doing what?”

The fucking nerve! Killing him right now would be justifiable self-defence, really. His hand moves to shove Dazai’s shoulder, but the gesture lands with uncharacteristic delicacy.

It’s alright, Chuuya’ll eventually figure out that yearning cannot be silenced with either violence or potential property damage.

Not today, not tomorrow, probably not even the day after, but eventually he will.

Real change happens in the margins of life itself, especially for men whose everyday life constantly welcomes the abnormal. Supernatural abilities are back to being the norm, without curses or magic getting in the way.

Whatever that creature was, and whatever was skinned to produce the note currently residing in one of Chuuya’s drawers, is inconsequential: no similar events have graced the city of Yokohama ever since.

We shall spare no more thoughts on the creature; the margins are way more interesting to look at.

Dazai sleeps over the next day. Then he sleeps over again. The days fold into weeks, and by the time frost dusts the last of the autumn leaves their story has morphed into something unrecognisable: a detective’s toothbrush is in Chuuya’s bathroom. It’s brand new, the onset of a decent habit most human beings perform with no effort, but it’s also a slow and insidious colonisation.

Nobody comments on it, because those items imply permanence, which is a notoriously frail concept when handled by bandaged hands.

Chuuya lets it happen, day by day: a charger plugged into a wall, next to his own; some clothes, abandoned on the floor one day and then, the next, they can be found inhabiting a free drawer, folded with care; a shitty lighter… it’s a lot of shit, we’re not listing the whole catalogue. Chuuya himself is doing his best not to focus on each and every item, for the sake of his sanity.

Sleep has stopped eluding them both, on most days at least, probably lured in by the combined charm of two men tangled in the most improbable positions, stealing each other’s warmth even when it’s all but necessary.

Many firsts happen, and even if neither of them is inexperienced, they’re mostly terrible. The first kiss has too many teeth and impatience, and their first time is a comfortingly clumsy mess: they knock over a designer lamp and Dazai loses the condom wrapper in the sheets, to be retrieved only a week later. In the aftermath both idiots display blossoming bruises, mostly teeth-shaped except for a single one, right in the small of Dazai’s back, where ankles crossed and tightened way more than necessary.

Daily practice smothers the clumsiness in the span of a week; they fuck like they’re trying to make up for lost time, yet it’s unclear if they’re compensating for four years of silence or for seven cumulative years of idiocy. Regardless of what it is, it makes them greedy, and also *mean:* pinning and being pinned, teeth and nails leaving semi-permanent ornaments on each other’s skin… customary violence channelled into the best of activities.

Except once, a night that Chuuya would recall with strange tenderness, with shaky bandaged hands and….

Well, that is a story for another time.

In the mornings, mostly, when Chuuya is still half-asleep and deliciously pliant, the bastard has developed an insufferable habit: he shifts closer, gently brushes away those long copper strands, and presses his lips on Chuuya's nape. He doesn't do much with it, it's just a couple of pecks here and there, chasing this or that freckle.

It'd be the most romantic way to wake up, wouldn't it? The kisses aren't what makes it insufferable, they're never enough to wake the mafioso up in the first place. No, unfortunately Chuuya surfaces from sleep, on most days, yanked to alertness by someone's hand kneading his left arse cheek. Variations of '*Get the fuck off'* and '*You're the worst'* are always met with a '*Good morning to you too'*.

At the beginning of December, Chuuya comes home late, just to find the bastard on the couch, with a comb, of all things. It's the comb Dazai himself purchased, before knowing the curse broke: it's nothing else but a small metal-toothed thing which is also, objectively, useless.

"Ya know that's for cats, right?" Of all the ways Chuuya could ask about what is going on, this is one of the worst ones.

"Testing it," Dazai mutters, with all the dignity he can muster whilst a comb is hanging on his forehead, holding for dear life onto a tangle.

"For what?! Whether it works on idiots?!"

That's the entirety of the memory Chuuya can recall; an inconsequential and ridiculous instance of the mackerel being weird. It'll eventually make sense, don't you worry, dear reader.

Another blatant notable change, noticed by Port Mafia grunts and commanders alike, could be summarised as follows: plenty of curses have mysteriously vanished from Chuuya-san's vocabulary.

No more "fuck me" hissed under his breath when anything went sideways, not because the ginger is turning into a well-adjusted human being, oh no. It's just that last time he said it, after dropping an egg on the floor, what he got back was: "Yes please! Give me five minutes to finish this article. Or don't."

That and similar exchanges successfully made the following curses impossible to use: 'fuck my life', 'bite me', 'oh, suck my dick', 'fuck me sideways'. The most unfortunate loss of them all is, most certainly, 'kiss my ass.'

Nobody has figured out why, not yet.

It’s an unremarkable Tuesday morning in the middle of December when it happens, under a grey sky promising snow.

Chuuya almost doesn’t hear it.

Yokohama is a city that likes to scream during the day, producing a cacophony of engines, voices, and the occasional bark of an adorable shepherd on its daily walk. So, a small hiccup in that chorus should go unnoticed, it’s nothing.

Said nothing seems to come from an alley, right in between a ramen shop and a tobacco store, and his polished shoes stop right in the middle. Maybe he just imagined it, and even if… it doesn’t matter.

A meow comes his way. It’s such a timid sound, almost apologetic, a plea made whilst knowing this is inconvenient.

If he ignores it, then he won’t be late, and Kouyou's serene disappointment won’t be waiting for him at the headquarters. Yokohama has strays, like every big city in Japan does: they're everywhere and largely ignored. Maybe he’d stop if it were a dog; his soles resume their original trajectory, carrying him past the gap between the buildings without further acknowledgment.

Another meow, weaker, as if the source has given up already. *Goddammit.*

He backpedals with a turn sharp enough to scuff the toes of his polished shoes, and he’s walking backwards into the alley. It’s, indeed, a cat, wedged in the minuscule corner where the dumpster meets the wall. Neither skinny nor well-fed, but an in-between that suggests that living on the street is a recent development.

The cat is orange, for the most part at least; it stares back up with a single, utterly surprised, green eye. Nobody must have heard it, until today, no matter how much it struggled to make its timid meow louder and louder.

A gloved hand brushes against the side of the dumpster, and it glows red as it scrapes against the wall, widening the gap. The cat comes into view: besides the copper, it has white patches on its paws and chest, and a big candid splotch frames its pink nose.

“A’ight, you’re out, now I’m goin’ to work,” yet despite this announcement, Chuuya doesn’t take a single step.

A wiser creature would flatten against the wall, at least, but this one is idiotic enough, or maybe just naive enough, not to. The cat sneezes with a ridiculously high-pitched squeal, and a shiver follows soon after, running through its whole body.

As a matter of fact, Chuuya knows exactly what it feels like, and it *sucks ass t*o endure the cold when you’re that size.

It starts vibrating like a tiny motor without a single touch, still staring up, before moving forwards. Not walking, that it is not, but its… weaving at every step: left, a sway, right, a

sway. It's quite difficult to explain, but when one sees it, they'll immediately know that it's not tied to weakness or malnutrition, but it's something way dumber: it's just purring loud enough that its sense of balance is as impaired as Chuuya's is, after half a bottle of wine.

It stops right in front of Chuuya's shoes, with its tail curled in a question mark completing a very implicit query: *where are we going now?*

"I'm not takin' ya home, so you know,"

The cat purrs a bit louder, smashing its face on Chuuya's ankle.

"I'm *not!"*

Of course he is not… he has a book about how to care for dogs! This *thing* here is not his responsibility!

"I got one bastard frequenting my home already, I don't need another one!" Chuuya is augmenting his case very well, as if it were necessary, as if any amount of words would deter such a trusting creature. How can it still be so trusting? To a guy who is, objectively, an awful human being? How has its trust survived living on the streets for god knows how long?

Being gullible is what makes people get stabbed with rat poison, even by those they wish to protect.

The universe never rewards trust, eh? It crushes it, day by day, squeezing naivety out of every breathing thing, teaching them how to survive. Those who don't learn end up being crushed, just like their hopes.

Maybe, today, the universe can go and *fuck itself.*

"C'mon, get here." Chuuya crouches down with a sigh, scooping it up in a fluid motion. He is immediately treated to purring fur butting against his chin in a flurry of desperate gratitude.

By the evening the cat resides in an open shoebox on the kitchen counter: it… he has been washed, dried and patched up. He is watching the door through two half-lidded eyes, with the alert patience of a creature that has a theory about it: good things sometimes come through it, so he should pay attention.

Putting him on the counter is probably a hygienic mistake, but this is also where Dazai goes first when he comes to Chuuya's, straight for the coffee machine, even if it's 9 p.m. and consuming stimulants would be inadvisable for every normal human.

You see, it's strategic, Chuuya wants to see the events unfold in a specific order, which is, incidentally, the order which requires the least input and explanation.

The door opens, and it takes the detective an embarrassing amount of time to discern what he's looking at: this is not the curse, too much white fur and Chuuya is standing right there. "Why is there a cat in a shoebox?"

“Take a wild fucking guess, genius,” the ginger shoots back, rolling his eyes.

A couple of wide strides and Dazai crosses the room, coming face-to-face with the box and its temporary resident. He approaches it carefully, which is amusing to look at because the feline is all but spooked… it’s actually preening, lifting his chin and puffing his chest a little.

“Hi,” he muses in *that voice*, the specific one Dazai made months ago, with rain soaking through his coat: it’s a chime reserved for the restricted list of things he finds cute. It takes a single finger, curling under the cat’s chin, to ignite the purring.

Egged on by the prolonged contact, the cat stands up, a tiny king in his cardboard castle, and steps out, inching closer with a surprising lack of grace and pressing his whole body against the man’s torso.

“He trusts like a fool,” Dazai concludes, quietly, and that settles: these words implicitly announce Chuuya’s undeniable victory.

What victory?

His masterplan was a simple one, admittedly, concocted that same afternoon whilst he was gently cleaning the cat’s bad eye: a tiny orange cat, a mafioso in disguise, had been enough to stop Dazai once, so a trusting fool should do the trick too, no?

Permanence cannot be imposed, not to someone who’s running from himself… but such an incentive will work.

It may be wishful thinking, and Chuuya’s never been one for hope, but sometimes heaven is an orange cat.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, genuinely, to everyone who read, left kudos, subscribed or commented on this fic. Every single one of your comments made my days infinitely better, and it made finishing this way more fun than it would have been otherwise.
Thank you all again, see you in October! ♥
With the fic ‘The Warmest Place on Earth.’
Please, leave a comment; it'd make my day in these tiring times! Each and every comment will be welcomed and cherished, even if it's just an emoji! Whatever doesn't make me feel like I'm shouting into the void, really ♥
°. .

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope that you enjoyed it! I seem to be unable to write crack (nor fluff) without sprinkling some angst here and there; it's a personal failing, I'm aware.
If you could drop a kudos or a comment, that'd make my day!
It'll probably be a couple of months until I'll be able to resume my other WIPs here, and I'm sorry about it. I'll be working in the shadows, in tiny increments whenever my schedule allows it, but things are brewing!
Please, leave a comment; it'd make my day in these tiring times! Each and every comment will be welcomed and cherished, even if it's just an emoji! Whatever doesn't make me feel like I'm shouting into the void, really ♥
°. .

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!