

B U N G O

# STRAY DOGS

KAFKA ASAGIRI Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

2

OSAMU  
DAZAI  
AND THE  
DARK ERA













































































































































































































The earth suddenly shook. All of a sudden, my gaze met the ground in front of me. The next second, I realized I was falling, and I collapsed face-first, despite placing both my hands out to catch myself. My vision blurred. I felt sick. When I looked at my hands, they were covered in a sticky blue liquid; that ball had been coated in it. The parts of my hand covered in the liquid tingled uncomfortably. Major alarm bells rang wildly in my head.

The vision ended there.

I stood among the debris. The worst thing about the vision ending was that I was *already holding the handball*. I immediately threw it away, but it was too late. I started to feel dizzy just like a moment ago. I rubbed my palms on my coat to wipe off the blue slime, but it had already been absorbed into my skin and infiltrated my body. My skill, *Flawless*, allowed me to see a few seconds—more than five but less than six—into the future in my head. That was how I was able to avoid surprise attacks like sniper fire and explosions.

However, if I were to realize I was in danger after falling into the trap...there was no way for me to avoid it even if I did have a vision just like the moment before. I had been holding the handball for over six seconds. It was too late. Whoever did this knew about my skill inside and out. There weren't many people who did. Nervously sweating, I tried to warn Ango, but I couldn't talk. A dark shadow appeared noiselessly behind him; it was four—no, five people dressed in field tunics as dark as the night with gas masks hiding their faces. They weren't Mimic. None of them were carrying old-fashioned gray pistols, but rather state-of-the-art precision-guided rifles. They were with the Special Forces. One of the men in black tapped Ango on the shoulder. Ango turned around and nodded as if to say he understood.

"Odasaku, I apologize for the trouble I caused you."

Ango walked over and placed the handkerchief I had just given him in my hand. I couldn't brace myself, never mind hold the handkerchief. Ango took a white silk glove out of his pocket, then pulled it over his right hand before picking up the blue handball.

"You are free to speak of everything that happened here. Everything I told you about Mimic was true. I just wish I could have had a drink with you and

Dazai one last time at the usual place and time...”

A Special Forces soldier tapped Ango on the arm, seemingly giving him a signal. After responding with his gaze, Ango looked down at me and smiled as if he had given up.

“Take care of yourself.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ango turn his back to me before leaving with the Special Forces. I wasn’t even able to move my neck or eyes at that point. The world in front of me was slowly swallowed by darkness. My tongue numb, I called out to Ango as he left, but even I didn’t know what I was saying. An indescribable feeling of loneliness was the only thing filling my heart...as if I were floating at the end of the universe.

Even that was swallowed by darkness.

My consciousness faded to black.

### CHAPTER III

It had been raining that day. I was sitting. Time slowly, indistinctly passed by, and all sound was drowned out by the vague noise of falling rain. The world itself felt like an apparition. The rain poured down before my eyes at a slant, drenching the scenery and turning everything blue. Fog mixed with ocean mist intertwined with the downpour. The wet landscape and I sat face-to-face, though separated by glass.

I was fourteen years old at the time. I'd been at a café reading a book—an old book. The cover's corners were worn down, and a part of it was torn. The print was old, with some letters faded here and there. I'd found this book after a hit and brought it back with me, since the owner wouldn't be needing it anymore. I turned the pages.

I was a much simpler person at age fourteen. I'd been working as a freelance hit man doing contract assassinations, and not once did I ever fail. The wealthy original owner of this book along with his family were mere stains on the wall at that point. I could no longer remember why I brought this book back with me. Something about it—something slight—had just stuck in the back of my mind. I didn't have a habit of reading books at that stage in my life, but this one was different. It was an old novel. The story took place in a certain town, and it was about a myriad of characters. All the characters, though, were weak and pitiful—even the smallest things caused them panic. But mysteriously enough, it was a very engaging story.

After work, I always went to the same café and sat in the same seat to read this novel. It had become a daily routine, which was why I'd read that book so many times. I was reading it that day, too.

"You're always reading that same book, boy. Is it really that interesting?"

I looked up in the direction of the sudden voice.

Standing before me, straight as a ramrod, was a lanky middle-aged man with a cane and a short mustache that accentuated his faint smile. I'd seen him a few times at this café before. When I told him it was a good book, he looked at me curiously.

"You're a strange lad. There are plenty of stories out in this world that are much more interesting than that novel."

I stared at the man without saying a word. To tell the truth, I didn't even know how to explain to someone why I read this book so often.

"Where's the last volume?"

I looked at the stack on the table where the first two books lay. There was one major drawback about this novel: I had found only the first two volumes. Therefore, I had no idea how the story concluded. I went to every possible used bookstore I could come by, but I still couldn't find the final volume. I told the man I didn't own it.

"Now it makes sense. You're a lucky kid. The last volume to that series is the worst of the worst. It's so bad that you'll want to wash out your brain once you've finished it. Be happy with just the first two volumes. It's for your own good."

I told him I couldn't do that.

"Then you write what happens next," the man with the mustache said. "That's the only way to preserve its perfection."

I was dumbfounded. I'd never even thought about writing something myself.

"Writing novels is writing people," the man said. "It's about how they live and how they die. From what I can see, you're perfectly qualified."

I couldn't say a word. I didn't feel I had the qualifications he claimed; that day, I had just gotten back from murdering yet another person for work.

But there was something oddly persuasive about what that man said. It was as if brilliant radiance from light-years away glittered in his eyes, and there was a certain firmness to his voice that seemed powerful enough to shake the earth itself. I'd never seen such a person before.

When I'd asked him his name, he had told me, but I'd long since forgotten it.

A few days later, I went back to the café at the same time to find a book lying in my usual seat. Stuck to the cover was a piece of paper that read, "Don't blame me if you regret it."

It was the last volume.

I spent the entire day reading that book.

As for what I thought of it—



I opened my eyes to find myself in bed. Both my hands were wrapped in bandages.

When I sat up, the pain in my back from my close encounter with the explosion returned. I let out a moan.

I was in a hospital room. It was clean, ordinary, and as silent as a morgue. Standing firm with his feet apart by the door was a man in a black suit and sunglasses. The moment our eyes met, he silently left, apparently to go get someone.

"Hey, Odasaku. You're awake now, right? How are you feeling?"

Dazai walked into the room with a cheerful smirk.

"I feel like I've been hit with the next fifty years' worth of hangovers," I replied, then looked around the room. "Did you find Ango?"

"No, my men only found you lying on the ground. They didn't see any sign of the enemy, not even so much as a shadow. Akutagawa was really frustrated that he couldn't 'execute the traitor.' ...Anyway, Ango really was there, huh?"

I explained everything that happened at the abandoned building, telling him every little detail as it had really occurred.

"Ango's captivity, the explosion, André Gide, and the Special Forces dressed in black..."

Dazai placed a thumb against his lips, then shifted into a thinking position. He didn't even move an inch for a full minute after that. Only his eyes wavered,



following something only he could see. I waited in silence.

“Things can be mainly classified into two phenomena here.” Dazai finally spoke up. “One is the criminal syndicate Mimic’s attack. The other is Ango and the Special Forces’ secret maneuvers.”

“Are the Special Forces and Mimic different organizations?”

“They are. To be a little more specific, this huge dispute is due to three forces coming together: the Mafia, Mimic, and the Special Forces. But we can ignore the last one for now. It’s Mimic we need to watch out for. While you were sleeping, six shops on Mafia turf were blown up...all at the same time. The casualties are increasing by the minute.”

Along with smuggling and trading stolen goods, the Mafia protected shops and companies in exchange for compensation. If those businesses were attacked, then the Mafia instantly lost its supporters’ trust along with some of its economic infrastructure. I suddenly thought of Pops at the restaurant. That place was one of the few I managed.

“But the smaller stores are being saved for later, it seems.”

Dazai must have read my mind.

“Mimic is like nothing we’ve faced so far. They’re terribly quick, their attacks are devastating, and they show up without even making a sound. Even if we wanted to attack their headquarters, they appear out of nowhere and disappear into thin air. There’s no way to take them by surprise. It’s *as if we’re fighting against ghosts*—against real *grau geists*.”

I thought back to the sniper and the abandoned building where Ango had been held captive. There really was something ghostlike about their existence.

A ghost squad—departed souls that wished to devour even the corrupt Mafia’s spirit.

“We still can’t determine a definite pattern of attack, but what we do know is that they’re serious about leveling the Mafia’s turf. Not even the tormented souls of hell would do something so mad. Akutagawa and other militant factions have formed ranks and are fighting back, but...we still don’t even know the enemy leader’s skill. We’re at a disadvantage.”

“That skill user Akutagawa was one of your subordinates, right?” I said, tracing my memory. “I heard he had a rather aggressive skill...but even he’s no match for them?”

“Akutagawa—he’s like a sword without a sheath.” Dazai grinned from ear to ear. “He’ll surely become the Mafia’s strongest skill user in the not-so-distant future, but for now he needs someone who can teach him how to put that sword away.”

I was surprised. I had never heard Dazai openly speak so highly of one of his men like that before.

“Is he really that talented?”

“When I first saw him over in the slums, I was horrified. His talents are extraordinary, and his skill is extremely destructive. Plus, he’s stubborn. If I’d left him to his own devices, he would’ve ended up a slave to his own powers until he destroyed himself.”

Dazai didn’t freely make people work under him, period; much less a boy on the verge of starvation in the slums. But Dazai seemed to have his own reasons for doing it.

“At any rate, back on topic, Mimic is who we currently have to watch out for. There’s been a call for a meeting among the five executives where we’ll discuss how to take them on using everything we’ve got. We’re on high alert.”

This presidium was an extremely powerful legislative conference that would decide the future course of the entire Mafia. As far as I could remember, the last time they had one was during the Dragon’s Head Conflict. I was once again face-to-face with just how much of a threat Mimic was.

“I still don’t know what those Special Forces are after,” Dazai continued. “But after seeing what they did to you, it looks like they won’t be baring their fangs and attacking us anytime soon. It’s Mimic that’s the real threat. Just a little while ago, my men, including Akutagawa, were ambushed. It was like a beast devouring a venomous snake. The battle took place on the main road in front of the art museum—”

I got out of the bed as I listened. My fingers were still slightly numb, but not

enough to bother me during battle.

“Odasaku, don’t tell me you plan on going,” he said as if reprimanding me.

“The Mafia’s striking back with everything we’ve got, right?” I replied, sliding my arms through the sleeves of my overcoat that was hanging on the wall.

“I thought you had no interest in fighting,” Dazai replied with a smile.

“I don’t,” I insisted as I equipped my gun harness. “But sometimes small things pick at my heart...like the two people I owe a debt to.”

After finishing getting ready, I walked across the room. Dazai watched me in silence. As I reached the door, he tossed me something that jingled when I caught it. I opened my hand to find a car key. Then Dazai added, “Don’t worry about any debts. Nobody ever even remembers doing favors.”

“I’m not good at forgetting,” I turned around and replied. “Dazai, you’ve already helped me several times with this case. Your men are under attack, right? They need your help.”

“Y’know, it really hurts me that you consider something as small as this a debt.” He gave a feeble smirk. “So who’s the other guy you owe?”

I didn’t answer him; I just opened the door and left. Dazai saw me off without pushing any further. Despite not even exchanging a word, we were thinking the same thing.



Two forces were engaged in a shoot-out in front of the chalky-white shrine: the Mimic soldiers in tattered gray clothes and the Mafia members in black suits and sunglasses. Both were firing the same foreign automatic rifles. Bullets flew across the town square, chipping away at the shrine’s pale-colored pillars like an ice sculpture.

They were battling on the art museum’s front yard. The rectangular building with its alabaster facade rose high into the sky. Square cobble paving stretched endlessly across the yard, evoking a digital, pixelated kind of feel. White columns spaced closely together acted as shields for the gunfire as they came crumbling down one after another.

There were four Mafia members and nine Mimic. Mimic was dominating in quality, quantity, and experience as they backed the Mafia into a corner.

They split up into two groups to pour cross fire through a pincer movement. One of the Mafia men yelled orders while returning fire as they retreated into the art museum. The Mimic soldiers, on the other hand, did not say a word. They simply advanced, chasing their prey in silence. As the first Mimic soldier stepped into the building, something caught his eye, and he quickly looked up.

That, however, ended up being the last move he ever made.

“Do you not enjoy art?”

The soldier’s head flew to one side, then bounced off the wall before rolling back to its owner’s feet. It took a moment before fresh blood spurted out from the clean cut severing the soldier’s neck. A dark shadow drifted down to the ground, its black overcoat elegantly billowing in the breeze. Realizing something was wrong, the following Mimic soldier drew his gun.

“How boorish. The artwork here is the manifestation of the human spirit. Show some respect.”

The shadowy figure twisted his body, gently pivoting his black overcoat. It split into three parts, each transforming into a massless blade before launching forward.

First, the rifle was split in two. Its contents then spilled out, showing a perfectly smooth slice all the way through.

Next, the fingers holding the rifle noiselessly dropped to the ground one by one. Finally, the Mimic soldier’s torso slowly slid forward as his lower half leaned backward before they hit the ground.

The remaining soldiers, who had fortunately been out of range of the dark blades’ slaughter, simultaneously aimed their muzzles at the black overcoat and pulled the trigger.

“Guns are the instruments of fools.”

The shadowy figure in a black overcoat, Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, took another step forward. A split second later, the twelve bullets clashed with what

appeared to be silent blades of solidified darkness. Most of the bullets were reflected before even reaching Akutagawa, while the remaining ones crashed into an invisible wall, stopping mere inches away from him. Akutagawa cut through space, creating a shield. He twisted his body, and the murderous shadowy blades sprung forward as if to answer his calls.

One man's face; another, his body; even one soldier's legs were all sliced in half. Still, the blades' wild dance had not ended. They soared through the air like a violent tempest of darkness destroying everything in its path, as if they were living creatures with minds of their own. It was a skill specialized only in destruction and killing—nothing more.

Akutagawa laughed.

It was as if a pitch-black demon were devouring the gray ghosts.

*“Retraite!”*

The surviving Mimic soldiers' faces turned sickly pale as they quickly backed away.

“Come back! Fight me!” Akutagawa screamed while chasing after them. Black spears and bullets clashed violently across the battlefield.

“This is nothing! This barely even counts as a trial! Show me cruelty—show me the sort of brutality that will freeze my very soul!” the boy dressed in black screamed, an echo of supplication in his voice.

Just then, a Mimic personnel carrier appeared before the art museum containing new soldiers. Like a mad dog, a fiendish smirk played across Akutagawa's lips.

That was when a signal flare shot into the air from the personnel carrier. The phosphorescence raced straight up, leaving a red trail in the sky and casting a shadow over the earth below.

Immediately, the Mimic soldiers ceased fire.

“What—?”

Bewildered, Akutagawa surveyed the battlefield. Not a single enemy was holding up their gun. One after another, they placed their weapons on the

ground. Some even had both hands already in the air.

“They’re surrendering?” Akutagawa muttered in disbelief. “Impossible.”

With his arms raised, one soldier walked over from the other side of the group. He had handsome features, and both his clothes and hair were a sickly silver-gray hue, as if his soul had been sucked out. The man looked essentially the same as the other Mimic soldiers but was disproportionately taller than the rest. And yet, his footsteps didn’t make a sound; it was as if he were weightless. Decorating the breast of his military fatigues were various medals of honor in all different colors. The soldier’s emotionless eyes locked on Akutagawa. Confused and at a loss, the Mafia members pointed their guns at the defenseless man as he approached.

“So it’s you... You’re the black-robed skill user they say is immune to bullets,” the tall man said, his lips barely moving. His voice seemed to come from nowhere in particular, like a howling wind.

“Who are you?”

“The commander... Mimic’s leader.”

The moment his words sunk in, the Mafia combatants rushed over in unison before pointing their guns at him. The Mimic leader’s eyes did not even waver.

“Their leader himself has come to surrender? An admirable attitude, but hardly believable... In fact, it disgusts me.”

Akutagawa’s overcoat transformed into several black belts that bound the Mimic leader’s hands and feet together before dragging the man to his knees.

“State your name, leader of Mimic.”

“Gide. André Gide. I came to ask you for...a match.”

The leader’s tone was calm; he didn’t appear to be shaken in the least.

“The Mimic leader himself wishes to fight me? What an honor that would be if I actually believed you. Answering questions you haven’t been asked only makes you less convincing.” Akutagawa shot the man a piercing glare as he spoke. “Leader of Mimic, do you know why I haven’t cut your head off yet?”

“Maybe because...you were disciplined not to?”

Akutagawa punched Gide in the face. With both legs tied together, he was unable to dodge, and a drop of blood spilled from the corner of his mouth.

“The reason I haven’t cut your head off yet is that I heard Mimic’s leader was a skill user.”

Akutagawa swiped the old-fashioned gun from Gide’s waist, then pointed it at him.

“I can’t gain *his* acceptance no matter how many pea-shooting weaklings I kill. Show me your skill. If it is the real thing, I will give you that match you so desire.”

Gide just stared at Akutagawa and the gun.

“So this is your skill... You can control the black overcoat,” he groaned, staring at the black straps around his arms and legs. “An extraordinary ability, one with no openings. However...it’s lacking. It’s not enough to free our souls from original sin... It appears I expected a little too much from you.”

Akutagawa’s face stiffened as hard as a diamond. His breathing halted, and something in his body snapped. He responded with the flash of his black blade, slashing toward a man who was tied up and unable to move. Without even a hint of nervousness, Gide leaned forward and tilted his head. The blade grazed the side of his face, cutting a few hairs to flutter in the wind. As Gide turned his neck, the tip of his head skimmed the old-fashioned gun Akutagawa had just stolen. As the pistol left Akutagawa’s hand, his finger accidentally pulled the trigger.

One of the belts around Gide reacted by enveloping the bullet and stopping it before it could reach Akutagawa. However, this freed Gide’s left hand...and he was carrying another pistol in his military uniform. He drew the gun with that hand and shot the mafioso next to him before the target even knew what was going on. The bullet struck him in the shoulder, causing the Mafia member’s automatic rifle to fire three bullets, with one shooting right through Akutagawa’s arm. The other two hit two mafiosi in the chest. The shots were fatal.

“What—?!”

Taken aback at being shot in the arm, Akutagawa reflexively used his skill to block. He cut through space, blocking Gide's next shot, but in return he ended up undoing the black straps restraining Gide, thus freeing him.

Immediately, Gide picked up his other gun lying on the ground...and that was when the one-sided massacre began.

It wasn't some sort of mysterious, visible power at work. The bullets weren't turning and flying in the opposite direction, nor was lightning or fire falling from the skies. No one was suddenly being frozen in place, either. It was simply a repeat of the earlier gunfight with the exception that everything was taking place at extremely close range—that, and the outcome was different.

Gide rolled over the ground while shooting the pistols in both hands. Each bullet pierced straight and true into a Mafia member's vital organ. Only Akutagawa was able to defend—or rather, he was *forced to defend* would be a more accurate description.

“What's going on? Is this...a skill?” Akutagawa uttered.

Gunfire illuminated Gide's surroundings as he evaded every counterattack, be it bullets or Akutagawa's black claws. With the slightest of movements, Gide dodged Akutagawa as if he were a mere insect. Before long, one of Gide's bullets eventually sneaked past Akutagawa's guard and hit him in the abdomen with enough force that it bent him backward. Coughing up blood, Akutagawa fell back and immediately wrapped his black fabric around the wounds on his arm and stomach to act as makeshift tourniquets. However, the result gave him less fabric to use to attack and defend, which put him at an even bigger disadvantage.

“Impossible... A destructive skill that surpasses mine?”

“I'm jealous, Mafia skill user... I might have asked the same thing.” Gide stood with both pistols drawn. “If you were a little more capable—if you had more experience, then perhaps things would have been different. But right now, you're nothing more than a little black duckling.”

“Don't you dare talk down to me!”

Akutagawa's hair stood on end. His black coat whirled as it started to form



spikes, but Gide shot them down right as they were about to launch at the speed of sound.

“You...can read my movements...?!”

“We are Mimic.” Gide aimed his gun at Akutagawa. “We are a squad of ghosts—a *fantôme escouade* forsaken by God and fallen from grace. We shall continue to march through tainted blood until our true enemy brings us salvation.”

Akutagawa was briefly overwhelmed by Gide’s presence...because he knew Gide was neither acting nor bluffing, but speaking only the truth. He could see it in his eyes.

“...Answer me, leader of Mimic,” Akutagawa said in a quiet voice with a gun to his face. “What are you trying to accomplish by attacking the Mafia’s territory?”

“Nothing,” Gide replied without missing a beat. “Ghosts wish for nothing. All we want is for our souls to cease to exist. Long ago, we turned to the Order of the Clock Tower for that purpose. Now we are here to demand that from you... Any last words, black-robed skill user?”

“Kill me.” Akutagawa closed his eyes, then gave a small smirk. “I—understand your feelings, truly I do. I regret that I couldn’t become the *enemy* you sought.”

“Farewell.”

Gide pulled the trigger.

But he didn’t fire. Right before he was about to shoot, he reflexively took evasive action. Raising his pistols up, he turned his body to dodge something... but his efforts were in vain. *Odasaku’s bullet hit the pistol out of Gide’s hand.*

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My bullet struck the enemy’s pistol, knocking it to the ground. The man who I assumed was the Mimic leader seemed to be taken aback. Maybe he was surprised I’d shot his weapon with such accuracy from so far away, although he looked startled by something else, as well. There was something curious about how he’d tried to dodge before I even fired my weapon.

That wasn’t the time to think about it, though. I rushed toward the enemy as I

shot. He fired back, but I could already “see” the bullet’s trail. Turning my head, I evaded the incoming bullet. I then fired back, but he dodged in the same way.

*He dodged?*

“Mafia reinforcements...?!”

Neither of our bullets were connecting as we drew closer until I was near enough to grab his gun. And I did make a swipe for it, but the Mimic leader nimbly twisted his wrist, thus avoiding my hand. It was the same bizarre reaction from a second ago. He could read my every move.

I promptly gave up on trying to neutralize the enemy and searched for any Mafia members that were still alive. Most of them had already perished, but there was a boy in a black overcoat who was still conscious. Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, I believe his name was.

“We’re getting out of here.”

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

He resisted, but I hoisted him up on my shoulder and made a dash for an exit route. Akutagawa was as light as a tree branch. Someone that thin would bleed out and turn into a mummy in no time. In an instant, I was welcomed by the concentrated fire of the Mimic soldiers’ automatic rifles. Having already seen the attack in a vision, I dived to the side, still holding Akutagawa, and avoided the line of fire. Akutagawa groaned in pain as his wound opened, but I was in no position to comfort him at that moment. I ran away as quickly as I could while firing warning shots at the enemy. Then, right as they took cover, I broke for the man-made forest.

While I heard orders being yelled behind me to pursue, I sprinted through the artificial forest of sparsely planted larches. The trees here should give me a little protection from their attacks, but there was no guarantee this wouldn’t lead us to a dead end.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to put you down. Can you run?”

I lowered Akutagawa to the ground. He knelt onto some thick underbrush as fresh blood dripped out of the wound on his stomach.

“I’m Sakunosuke Oda, a friend of Dazai’s. I came to help you escape from this hell.”

I extended a hand, but he simply clutched his abdomen without moving. While his skill was powerful in both offense and defense, I heard he was rather frail physically.



Out of nowhere, I had a vision. After it was over, I lunged backward in response to what I had seen. Then, like a flash of darkness, a blade swung right through where my head just was.

“I’ve heard about you. You’re nothing more than a lackey,” Akutagawa said, panting. His eyes glowed with outrage as if he was going to pounce at me any second.

“Yep.”

“You’re ‘Dazai’s friend’?”

His penetrating gaze shot right through me. It was as if something had set his heart ablaze with utter darkness.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Dazai told me something once. He said I could train a hundred years and still wouldn’t be able to defeat you.” Akutagawa’s murderous rage swelled and burst forth. “He wouldn’t lie, which is exactly why I can’t forgive you. I’m inferior to even you, the lowest-ranking member of the Mafia? Why? Why? Why?”

Three strips of black fabric soared toward me. Having already seen his attack in a vision, I rolled to the side and dodged. The tree behind me was sliced in two before falling down with a loud crack.

“We don’t have time to fight between ourselves. The enemy will be here any moment now.”

“Why?! Why did Dazai...?!”

I lowered my head until it was almost touching the ground. After cutting down a few trees, the black fabric behind me swung back right over my head. Immediately, a few more trees collapsed.

What a frightening skill. It had extraordinary range and speed. What was more, the blades sliced through everything they touched, making it one of the most powerful skills in the Mafia. The idea of someone this talented at this age was spine-chilling. I could see why Dazai wanted to keep him by his side to train him. However, now wasn’t the time for admiration.

As I shot my pistol at Akutagawa, he sliced the space before him with the black fabric he had apparently been storing by his side. The bullet then sank into the cut space and stopped. However, I already knew about his defense mechanism, so I used that opening to slide to his side and kicked his injured arm with everything I had.

“Gah...?!”

The excruciating pain forced Akutagawa to writhe and fall unconscious. He was already mentally drained from using his skill over and over again and from guarding multiple times with a technique he wasn't yet accustomed to using. The kick to the gunshot wound was enough to send him over the edge.

He was barely conscious regardless.

I'd heard that Dazai's Spartan training style was relentless, but no matter how effective it was in producing fast results, Akutagawa was still a kid. Mentally, he was already exhausted from battling the Mimic soldiers, its leader, and me all in quick succession. No one would've been surprised if he'd passed out on his own. Just where did that tenacity come from?

*“Why?! Why did Dazai...?!”*

When he'd let out that anguished cry, I caught a glimpse of something faint—something other than anger—hidden behind his expression. I couldn't get it out of my head.

“I had a feeling...that I would find someone in this country with that skill.”

“What are you talking about?”

I turned around.

The Mimic leader stood at the forest's entrance with three of his men. Since I could no longer hear any gunfire, you could've even described the man-made forest as tranquil in that moment.

“I am André Gide. We ghosts came in search of...the one who will free our souls,” the leader claimed.

He had striking features. If he were wearing a fancy suit with a glass of wine in hand, I could see him being an actor in a movie. However, there was a certain

quality to the timbre of his voice that sounded like something from decades past.

“Well, I know this guy who works at a funeral home. I’m sure he’ll give you a discount if I put in a word for you.”

“That won’t be necessary...because I just found who I was looking for.”

At the same instant, Gide shot his pistol, aiming for right between my eyes. It was an extremely accurate shot, but knowing it was coming five seconds in advance made it easy to dodge.

I took half a step to my right. One bullet hit me between the eyes, the other through my heart. The assault weapon’s soft-point bullet broke through my cranium and into the back of my skull, sending me flying from the impact.

The vision ended there.

My skill showed me the future. While suppressing the panic flashing through my mind, I swerved to the left, contrary to what I did in my vision. However, the moment I dodged, a bullet was buried in my skull. The inside of my head shook from the impact, sending a soft, damp sound through my skull.

The vision ended there.

I stood in a daze. Gide hadn’t moved since he got there. He was still aiming his gun right at me and *hadn’t even pulled the trigger yet*. I was suddenly thrown into a deep pool of confusion.

*What’s going on?*

“Your confusion is my confusion as well,” Gide said after lowering the gun. “Because you can do exactly what I can. You have the skill to see danger that involves you seconds before it happens. I saw a future where you moved right, so I adjusted my aim accordingly. However, you ‘saw’ that future and swerved left instead. And I saw that future as well... Do you understand what I’m saying?”

*We have the same skill?*

“Your ability to observe the future is omnipotent. No one in this world can kill you...with the exception of me.” Gide’s cheeks tensed as his lips vaguely

stretched to the sides. It looked as if he was smiling. “And the only one who can bury me is you. You are the sole person who can end this war.”

His smile was truly from the heart. It was as if someone had injected ice-cold poison into my veins. I almost reflexively pointed my gun at him.

“Yes. Just like that,” Gide replied as if he were begging for it. “That bullet alone can stop this war. You’re a member of the Mafia. You should want nothing more than the head of your enemy.”

The muzzle of my gun was pointed at Gide. Everything he said was true. There was no telling who would win in a match between two people who could see the future. But there wasn’t anyone else in the Mafia who could even make him sweat.

I took in a deep breath before exhaling with the muzzle still aimed right at the enemy. Then I lowered my gun.

“I’ll pass,” I replied. “I came here to save my ally. And honestly, I haven’t killed anyone in years.”

“.....What?” That was the first time I heard a note of surprise in his voice. “Are you...not with the Mafia?”

“The Mafia’s full of all different kinds of people.”

“Guns are tools to kill, and this is a battlefield.” Gide gradually raised his voice. “So let us fight! Let us fight with all that we are—a battle that tears away at our souls! All a war needs is a single bullet. Even if you don’t shoot, you will have no choice but to fight back if I do!”

He aimed his gun at me. Only moments prior, I “saw” him fire.

“Everyone’s obsessed with fighting. They can’t get enough of it,” I said. “But not me. I’m interested in living. What interests me is how you guys live and what drives you to war. And if you die, that information will be forever lost.”

“There is no life more important than death!”

Gide pulled the trigger.

I had a vision.



The bullet hit me as I bent backward to dodge. I ducked, yet I was still hit. I tried swerving to the side, but the bullet connected. Each condition was superimposed as it played out through my head.

Foreseeing the future wouldn't help me in the least like this. I plunged forward in an attempt to decrease my area of damage. The enemies' bullets soared by, slightly grazing my temples. The Mimic soldiers shot their automatic rifles in tune with their leader; however, I was able to easily foresee it. Rolling over the dirt, I avoided their bullet shower, then fired back with both of my weapons. They were mere warning shots, purposely aimed to not hit anyone. After rolling to Akutagawa's side, I got on one knee and raised my guns.

"You purposely...missed?" Gide's expression darkened. "Do you...really believe this is the battle we have yearned for? What, what is it we've been fighting for until now...?"

"Sorry you came all the way to Japan for this, but I have my reasons for not killing anyone. Please find someone else."

"Why?!" Gide yelled. "After that battle, we searched for a place worthy of death. We wandered the world like specters! You are our only hope! Shoot! Shoot us! If you don't..."

His howls floated unheeded into the atmosphere. He sounded like a man deep in his grave, but also like someone who desperately wanted to live. It appeared I had no choice but to answer him. In hushed tones, I replied:

"The reason why I can't grant your wish is that I have a dream. When I quit the Mafia and am able to do anything I want, I will sit at a desk in a room with a view of the ocean..."

—*"Then you write what happens next."*

—*"That's the only way to preserve its perfection."*

"I want to be a novelist," I continued. "I want to throw away my gun. All I want in my hands are a pen and paper... A certain man once told me that writing novels is writing people... You cannot write about someone's life after you rob them of it. That's why I will never kill again."

All noises vanished in an instant. The sound of the wind, the sound of leaves

rubbing together—they all disappeared, filling the world with only silence.

That was something I had never told anyone before, not even Dazai or Ango.

“Is that your answer?” Gide asked in a low voice. “Is that the reason why you refuse to stand on the battlefield before us?”

“Yes,” I answered.

I looked at Gide, and he looked back at me. Our gazes quietly crossed as we tried to read the emotions hidden deep in each other’s eyes. That was when I realized the negotiation had failed. Gide aimed his gun at Akutagawa, who was still unconscious, and pulled the trigger.

It would’ve been impossible to pick up an unconscious body and dodge a bullet at the same time, so I threw myself in front of Akutagawa. The impact hit me right in the middle of the chest. I’d jumped to the side, and the force spun me around before I collapsed onto the ground and rolled back even farther.

“To live? We are already dead. We are but soulless masses of flesh controlled by the spirits of the departed. We are nothing more than empty shells waiting for a skill user like you to reduce these bodies to ash with your gunfire.”

Each cough brought an unbearable pain in my chest. I ripped my jacket and checked the bullet to find it stuck in my bulletproof vest. Even then, my sternum ached as if I’d been hit with a hammer.

“You’re not dead.” I slowly strung my words together. “I don’t know what happened to you in the past, but you can take your time to think about how you’ll die.”

“Why don’t you understand...? You’re the only one who can...!”

As he wrung every last bit of anger out of his voice, all emotion suddenly faded from Gide’s eyes like a candle going out. And just like that, his gray eyes were empty, as if I were staring into endless ruins.

“If that is your answer, then there is nothing that can be done. You will not kill me because you do not understand my desire. Also, I will not kill you because you are the only one who can guide us into the battlefield’s sacred fire.”

Without making a sound, the personnel carrier from earlier stopped alongside

the artificial forest's entrance behind Gide. Then he and his men quietly got into the truck to the very last man. The grave tone reminded me of a funeral. As they were about to take off, Gide looked back at me once more, then said, "I will make you understand."

His expression was pale. There was a note of sorrow in his voice that sounded like something not of this world. I couldn't even tell where it was coming from.

"I will make you understand me. I'll show you..., " Gide said while sternly pointing at his temple, "...what is in here. Then you will know the truth. You will understand that *one of us must die.*"

He silently walked away, got in the truck, and disappeared. However, at the final moment before he left, he cast a glance at me that chilled my blood. At last, he spoke.

"Look forward to it."



Ever since that day, Mimic stopped attacking us. After getting the injured the help they needed, I talked with Dazai a little. Then I locked myself in my room and cycled through my thoughts. In that dim room, I listened only to my heartbeat as I observed the emotions bubbling up from within me like foam. I had a feeling something was going to happen, and soon. Something big. Like the violet sky before nightfall, like faraway thunder before a downpour, I had a faint sense I was about to face something colossal. This foreboding had nothing to do with being a skill user; it was the small tinge everyone gets before something's about to happen. But realistically, there was virtually nothing I could do about it until it actually occurred and slapped me in the face. The world isn't kind. You have to be tough.

Night fell. Dazai contacted me and asked if I could meet him to discuss our plans going forward. I grabbed my coat and left my room.

"I like the night," Dazai said. "Nighttime is the Mafia's time."

The two of us took a walk through downtown Yokohama. The city residents were calmly roaming the streets. Buildings old and new equally bathed in the moist sea breeze. The golden stars in the sky flickered just like the lights on the

earth's surface.

"Where are we going now?"

"To meet someone." Dazai smiled. "Anyway, I feel for you, Odasaku. Not only did you run into the enemy's boss, but he made some serious advances toward you, too. At this rate, you guys will be married by the weekend."

"That's not what happened." At least, I hoped not. "They're just a group of weirdos who start wars for the sake of it."

"Oh? I think it's kinda cute, going to such lengths to plan another person's death. I never would've thought of doing that." There was more than a hint of amusement in his tone. "But I can't ignore what he said to you before he left. They might try to switch up their strategy before attacking again. I need to have my men keep an eye on you."

"How much longer is this conflict gonna last?"

"The Mimic soldiers don't bother me so much, but the leader's skill is a real pain. Surprise attacks won't work, which means we need some inside information. Got any ideas?"

The Mafia was making every effort to get intel on Mimic, but so far it had been all for naught.

"Ango's the only lead I've got," I said. "He was working as a double agent for the Mafia and Mimic for years. He ought to know a lot more than what he told me the other day."

"I agree." Dazai nodded.

"Is there no way to find him?"

"*There is,*" he plainly declared.

"Oh, there is?" I nodded. Then I found myself surprised. "Wait. There is?"

"More precisely, there's no need to search for him. He'll be waiting for us. All right, we're here."

I looked up in the direction Dazai was pointing in.

"Here?" I asked.

“Where else?” Dazai wryly smirked.

Before me was a familiar bar with a white sign and a small light glowing in the darkness of the night.



Dazai and I went down the dimly lit stairs to the basement. I could hear the faint voices of people conversing as my feet were enveloped in a white cloud of cigarette smoke. Thinking back, there was always someone there. Whenever I came by, I would always mysteriously run into a friend who would immediately greet me, even if we hadn't made plans to meet or if I'd just stopped by on a whim.

And that still hadn't changed.

“Hey, nice to see you. I've already started.”

In the exact same seat, ever his usual self, Ango raised his glass and greeted us. After giving the bartender the signal with my eyes, I raised a finger. Immediately, he gave me a quick glance of acknowledgment. Dazai and I then took the seats by Ango's side.

“You could've at least tried to get in touch with me,” I said.

“It took me a while to throw the pursuers off my trail.” Ango let out a bitter laugh. “I've had a lot of difficulties that prevented me from talking. But now there are no wiretaps, and nobody followed me here. I can drink to my heart's content. More importantly, how did you know I was here?”

“I found a handkerchief at the site of the explosion.” Dazai grinned fiendishly. “There was a napkin from this place wrapped inside. It was completely obvious. Who would've thought spies used such dated methods, huh?”

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered lending Ango my handkerchief before I passed out. That must've been when he slipped the napkin in. I just thought I'd lost it.

“We're the only ones who would pick up on something like that,” Ango said before letting out a small sigh. “I thought I'd never get to drink here again. I'm lucky. And I want to share this luck with my two friends.”

“Well, aren’t you being rather sentimental for an *undercover agent*,” Dazai coolly replied.

I looked at Ango. He didn’t immediately react to what Dazai had said, but his lips seemed to faintly curl.

“...I’m impressed,” Ango quietly admitted after a few moments went by.

“Ango, you were already somebody before you joined the Mafia. You were an *agent for the Home Affairs Ministry’s Special Division for Unusual Powers*, a secret government agency. Your mission was to keep an eye on the Mafia and report back to headquarters.”

“.....Yes,” Ango replied after a deep sigh.

“While you may be part of a secret organization that presides over the skill users in this country, you wouldn’t make it out unscathed if you took on the Port Mafia head-on. Plus, the mission of the Special Division for Unusual Powers is to *manage* skill users, not wipe them out. That’s why they sent an agent to infiltrate the Mafia to keep an eye on things. It was an unavoidable measure of action. Am I right?”

That would mean the entire mess that got Ango into the Mafia was set up by the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

“That’s when Mimic came up. This criminal organization of skill users planned on coming to Japan, and they would prove to be another headache for the Special Division for Unusual Powers to deal with. Therefore, they got you to keep an eye on them...as a double agent for the Mafia. Of course, those black-clothed Special Forces—the Division’s task force—would come to your rescue if needed.”

“Being a government official was a thankless job for little money,” Ango claimed with a scowl.

“So that would mean Ango wasn’t a double agent, but a *triple agent*,” I said.

“Yep.” Dazai nodded. “Well, that’s about the extent of my research. Anyway, enough boring stuff. Let’s drink.”

Glasses were then gently placed before our seats. Usually, we would say

cheers after that, but not this time. Perhaps that would never happen again.



Nobody spoke for a while after that. A bitter silence, more bitter than anything on the menu, filled the air between us.

“So...” Ango reluctantly spoke up since no one else would say anything. “Did you come here to affirm our abiding friendship?”

“As if.” Only the corners of Dazai’s lips curled. “We came to get information on Mimic. You knew that.”

“It’s strange. This is the same liquor I always order, yet it has no taste,” Ango muttered while staring at his glass as if he was talking to himself. Then he turned his gaze to me and asked, “The Division’s surveillance group informed us that you met Gide. Did you see his skill?”

I told him I saw that Gide could predict his enemy’s attacks.

“Even the Special Division for Unusual Powers has no way of dealing with that skill.” Ango shook his head. “The only option would be to drop a massive bomb on him...but he’s elusive. We can’t pin him down. The higher-ups apparently intend to let the Mafia deal with this case. After both crime syndicates take each other out, the Special Division for Unusual Powers can just manage whichever group survives, thus never having to sacrifice one of their own.”

Such a brilliant maneuver would be like killing two birds with one stone for the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

“How convenient.” Dazai tilted his head to the side. “But even the Mafia would have a hard time dealing with that skill.” Dazai then looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “...With the exception of one lowest-ranked mafioso, of course.”

“He’s a military veteran in command of countless powerful soldiers,” I mentioned as I stared at my reflection in my drink. “Besides, our skills merely allow us to *see a few seconds into the future*. Who wins depends on whoever’s more skilled in battle and with a gun.”

Being more skilled with a gun means being able to shoot your opponent from farther away with more accuracy.

“Odasaku’s marksmanship...” Dazai broke into a meaningful grin. “There’s a lot of uncertainty. Plus, there’s also the problem of a *skill singularity*.”

“Skill singularity?”

“Did anything unusual happen when you used your skill against Gide?”

After thinking about it for a moment, I told him something unusual did, in fact, happen. I saw multiple futures stacked on top of one another.

“It’s a phenomenon the government has started to research only recently.” Ango’s expression was stern as he spoke. “They’ve observed that when multiple skills interact, on rare occasions they’ll careen off into a completely unexpected direction. The details are unclear, but for example...let’s imagine two people are fighting, but both have the skill to *always strike first*... Or one has the skill to *always deceive their opponent* while the other has the skill to *always see the truth*... What would happen? The answer is *we don’t know until we try*. Most of the time, one skill ends up winning. However, in some rare cases, it leads to a phenomenon that isn’t initiated by either party. The Special Division for Unusual Powers calls this a *singularity*.”

Maybe what I saw then was a singularity. Or was a singularity something even beyond that?

“I really wasn’t supposed to tell you any of that,” Ango mentioned. “Even the fact that we met here would be a huge problem if the higher-ups in the Home Affairs Ministry ever find out. I’ll need to go into hiding for the time being.”

Dazai looked at Ango, then beamed as he said, “Oh my. It almost sounds like you think you’ll be able to leave here alive, Ango.”

The air froze. Ango’s expression slowly faded away, but Dazai was still smiling.

“I mean, you know what I’m saying, right? An elusive, secret agency of skill users shrouded in darkness—a group of mythical status that sends shivers down the spines of all criminal syndicates in the country—and one of the members from that organization is here right before my eyes. The amount of information I want out of you could create a tome thicker than the dictionary itself. Am I wrong?”

I naturally asked Dazai what was on my mind. “Do you plan on turning this



place into a war zone?”

Ango didn't even flinch. His face was frozen into an ambiguous smirk. He stared at Dazai as if his eyes were locked in place.

“It's my fault,” Ango said as if he had given up. “I made a mistake. I assumed that this place was the one place we could meet that transcended status or rank. I wouldn't want to cause any trouble here, so do to me as you will. I won't resist.”

Ango ought to have known just how horrifying Mafia torture was. There was no hope for him to return to the Special Division for Unusual Powers alive. Even if I took Ango's side there, nothing would change. There was no way to break out of Dazai's trap around the bar's perimeter, and the orphans at the restaurant would be killed if I betrayed the Mafia.

“Ango.” Dazai quietly spoke up, turning his hand back and forth as if to inspect both sides. “If I make just one phone call, my men will immediately surround the place. But they still haven't made a move. Get out of here before I change my mind.”

Ango tried to say something, but he swallowed his words.

“I'm not sad. I knew from the very beginning,” Dazai said. His face was a blank mask now. “It didn't matter whether you were with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. I always lose the things I don't want to lose the most. That's why I don't feel anything anymore. The moment you get your hands on something worth going after, you lose it. That's just how things are. There is nothing worth pursuing at the cost of prolonging a life of suffering.”

I stared at Dazai. We had known each other for a while, but this was the first time he'd ever opened up about himself. I could see a thorn the size of a harpoon wedged deeply into his life.

“Dazai, Odasaku, I am no different. As part of an underground organization whose duties must be kept secret, as a skill user who hunts other skill users, I have been engulfed in the darkness of the government for too long. I shall never walk in the light again.” Ango looked at us and continued, “If there ever comes a time when the Division and the Mafia no longer exist...if we're ever freed from the confines of our work...do you think we can drink here again like

this?”

“Don’t say any more, Ango,” a voice said nearby. It was my voice. “Just don’t.”

Ango shook his head, seemingly hurt. Then he gradually stood from his stool and slowly left the bar, his eyes downcast as if he was listening carefully to the sound of his own footsteps. I figured that was probably the last time I would ever see him. I looked to the seat he had been in to find something placed on the table next to his empty glass. After picking it up, I showed Dazai.

It was the photo we’d taken in that very bar only a few days ago. All three of us were laughing and smiling.

## CHAPTER IV

People's feelings reflect the weather, but the weather doesn't reciprocate. The bright, warm sun shone down on Yokohama that day as I walked through the city with a frown. I was sure I looked even grumpier than usual, since I was carrying stuff in both hands. I wasn't actually in a bad mood, though. It was merely a problem of balance because my hands were full with bags of toys and sweets. You'd need a little training to carry these with a smile.

They were for the kids. I'd picked up some presents for them, since I was sure they were getting sick of the refugee life. In fact, they were probably bored to tears hiding in the safe house Dazai prepared for them, so I was a little worried this wouldn't be enough of a bribe to bring smiles to their faces. After all, what's enough for adults is never enough for kids.

A young man riding a bicycle passed by while whistling. Young children ran ahead of their mother in pursuit of some great quarry that only they could see. I couldn't help but feel as though the war between two crime syndicates was taking place on the opposite side of the world.

I thought about Mimic while I walked. I thought about the lonely soldiers who lived to die. Gide said he'd make me understand. Those words were a curse to drag me into battle. But at the same time, they were the heartfelt screams of a young child. The only ones who could understand him were his men or his enemy—and it looked as if he wanted me to become the latter.

I didn't know whether killing each other was the right thing. At this rate, the war was going to continue until either the Mafia or Mimic was destroyed. Was there no way to end this peacefully somehow? Was there no way I could both understand them and still draw my modest boundary lines?

I also had to think about the kids. I planned on quitting the Mafia once they became independent enough to live on their own without my help. I didn't

know when that would be, but I knew it would come one day. The kids would grow into adults. Some might work at an office, some might become engineers, and others might even become professional baseball players. The oldest apparently dreamed of being in the Mafia like me, which was headache inducing, but, well, I figured I'd be able to talk him out of it. Once that all happened, I could finally toss my gun aside, sit at a desk somewhere I could see the ocean, and start writing my novel.

When I arrived in front of the building, I paused for a moment. The place Dazai found for the kids to stay in was an import license office affiliated with the Mafia. It was a two-story blue building by the ocean that had been baptized with rust from top to bottom by the sea breeze. To the side of the building was a spacious shared parking lot occupied by a moss-colored bus with nothing better to do.

From what I was told, Dazai rented out the entire building, so the employees there had been sent to a completely different office. He always went to extremes, but this measure was also proof that Dazai believed there was a high chance of the kids being targeted. With my hands full, I headed up the stairs while going over in my mind the list of who'd get which toy. After walking down the hallway, I opened the door to the meeting room the kids were supposedly using.

Nobody was inside. The desk had been overturned, there were holes in the wall, and the floor was scuffed, apparently from having something heavy dragged across it. The scattered crayons on the floor were crushed under large footprints. I heard a heavy thud as something hit the floor, then realized I had dropped the bags I was carrying. I began to run almost unconsciously. Rushing out of the meeting room, I descended the staircase in practically a single leap.

Once I got out of the building, I saw the undersized moss-colored bus in the parking lot starting to drive off.

As I looked at the rear window, I saw someone's hand reach out through the slightly opened curtains. The small hand banged against the glass. I could also see a person's face in the back seat; it was a young boy whose eyes were swollen from being punched.

The moment the boy saw me, his eyes flew open. It was the oldest kid whose dream was to join the Mafia one day. Noticing my gaze, he hurriedly pulled the curtains wide-open. Behind him were the other kids—he'd opened the curtains to show them to me.

The next moment, a Mimic soldier on the bus grabbed him by the shoulder and viciously threw him backward. The curtains were then yanked shut, and the boy disappeared behind them.

I desperately sprinted after the bus so hard that my knees were almost hitting my chin. The driver apparently noticed and sped up. I rushed out toward the street, placed a hand on the guardrail, then leaped over it to run parallel with the bus. The vehicle gradually drove faster. I reflexively reached under my coat, but I'd left my guns behind that day. What kind of Mafia member leaves his guns behind?

The light at the intersection was about to turn red, but the bus swerved left, barely even slowing down as the surrounding cars honked their horns. I watched where the bus was headed—there was a huge curve that went under the bridge and connected to the highway. I would have no chance of catching up with the bus if it made it that far. I had to end this before then. I dashed up the nearby staircase to the pedestrian overpass in three jumps, then sprinted to the middle before leaping to the nearby traffic overpass.

The overpass was protected with wire netting, which I grabbed onto with one hand to catch myself from falling. Then I climbed up the netting and stood on top of the overpass. Next, I rushed down the concrete until I approached an area that intersected with the road below. At that very moment, the bus began to pass below my feet.

I waited until the time was just right to jump. My coat billowed with air and rustled in the wind. I landed on the roof of a red minivan that was driving in front of the bus, throwing out my hand and one knee to blunt the fall. I heard someone inside the minivan scream.

When I turned around, I saw the bus and a Mimic soldier in gray behind the wheel. He fastened his gaze on me with bloodshot eyes. There were at least two enemies on that bus. They were military, and almost certainly armed. I, on

the other hand, had no backup or weapon to defend myself with. But I would be able to handle things as long as I got just one look at the enemy. The bus itself sped up, closing in on the minivan. It looked as if the bus driver wanted to hit me along with the car. In this kind of situation, I'd normally want to cower and run the other way—that is, if I hadn't seen the kid's swollen face moments prior.

After a brief yet silent apology, I violently kicked the minivan's side-view mirror with my heel. The metal snapped as the mirror lazily fell, only to dangle by the vehicle's side. Right as I reached out and tore it off, the bus rammed the red minivan. I desperately latched on as the car drastically swerved to the side, and then I threw the side-view mirror in my hand directly at the Mimic soldier driving the bus. The oversize red-painted mirror shattered the front window and smashed straight into the driver's face before he could draw his gun. Immediately, he slammed on the brakes as he began to lose consciousness. Like an intoxicated rhinoceros, the bus swerved back and forth before eventually coming to a stop. Meanwhile, the minivan I was standing on also came to a halt as if it had drawn its last breath. I jumped off the roof.

When I faced the bus, I got a terrible feeling, as if someone had just put my heart in a vise. Alarm bells relentlessly pounded in my head. My vision flashed red and white. Before I'd even realized it, I was already sprinting.

—*"I will make you understand me."*

The driver was holding some kind of signal transmitter. I already knew what that meant. My body, however, hadn't caught up yet. A single moment that felt like an eternity passed by. The Mimic soldier pressed the switch on the transmitter.

And just like that, the bus instantly exploded.

My body was blasted back by a wall of air. I lost consciousness as I flew through the sky, but my back crashed into a nearby car, jolting me awake. I looked at the bus. Pillars of fire rose out of each window as it flew in the air almost as high as the eye could see. After briefly spinning through the air, it quickly fell onto the side of the road.

A moment went by before shards of glass rained from above. I tried to rush

over. I tried to sprint to the bus even if it would only get me there a second faster. But in reality, all I did was fall face-first and writhe pathetically on the hard asphalt. The bus went up in flames. It lay on its side, bent in the middle. I tasted blood in the back of my throat. There was a deafening ringing in my ears, and I could barely hear a thing.

—*“Like, he treats us all like kids, but we’re all adults here, ya know?”*

My throat hurt. I couldn’t breathe. I could hear someone’s screams from afar. I realized—because my throat was in so much pain—that the one screaming was me.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

✕ ✕ ✕

A small sightseeing ship floated in the Yokohama Bay. Gentle waves glittered in the rays of sun from a crystal-clear sky. The ship quietly drifted through the waters as it bathed in the reflected glare.

Only a few people were on board the vessel. In the center stood a young man with scholarly features and round glasses—Ango Sakaguchi, an agent with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. A man was sitting to his right.

“Ango, it’s been a while. Thanks for inviting me. How have things been since returning to your real job?”

A man with slicked-back black hair and a white coat—the Port Mafia boss, Ougai Mori—spoke to Ango in a friendly manner.

“.....” Without saying a word, Ango simply lowered his gaze nervously.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t pick on my youngster here, Mafia leader.”

Sitting on Ango’s other side was a tall, middle-aged man with white hair who towered over the rest of the people on the boat. He was Chief Taneda, the commander in chief of the Home Affairs Ministry’s Special Division for Unusual Powers.

Behind the Mafia boss and the Division chief respectively were men in black suits standing guard and the Special Forces in black. However, not a single soul was armed.

His expression strained with tension, Ango said, “Thank you for coming today. Once again, this is an unofficial meeting. All audio and visual recordings or physical intervention by anyone other than those present will be treated as acts of treachery, and the meeting will be immediately terminated.”

Ango glanced at the bay as he spoke. Men from each organization secretly, or perhaps openly, waited on land off in the distance. In the unlikely case that one party decided to betray and kill the other during the meeting, the injured party’s subordinates on the coast would immediately annihilate the enemy. This meeting was created on a state of delicate balance with each party holding a knife to the other’s throat.

“My little Elise has been nagging me to buy her ice cream on the way home. Do you know of any good places, Chief Taneda?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, isn’t that sweet.” Chief Taneda laughed while cooling himself off with the fan in his hand. “Maybe I should pick something up for the bureaucrats waiting for my report back at the Home Affairs Ministry, too. They’d love to have your head, I’ll tell ya.”

Two Mafia subordinates waiting behind their boss started to shake with rage. However, the boss simply smirked with an air of indifference.

“Feigning concern for the higher-ups at the Home Affairs Ministry to boost your reputation? Government officials always seem to have something to worry about, don’t they, Chief Taneda?”

“Oh, it’s a trifling concern when compared with someone who has to hide in the sewers in fear of getting squashed by the government.”

The two men spoke and looked as if they were playing shogi under the eaves of a house together. But the designated mediator, Ango, who was standing in the middle, couldn’t stop himself from breaking into a cold sweat. If the two men before him seriously went at it, then Yokohama would become a city of corpses before three days had passed.

“Now, let’s talk business,” said Ango. Even the Division’s elite needed to exercise utmost caution when interrupting these two. “Mr. Taneda of the Special Division for Unusual Powers has two requests for Mr. Ougai of the Port Mafia. First, you are to neither concern yourself with nor inflict harm on me,



Ango. Next, you are to wipe out the European crime syndicate, Mimic, that illegally entered Japan. Do you accept?”

“I have no problems with the first condition. Personally, I’m actually extremely grateful to you, Ango. You’re talented, and you supported me a great deal with my work, regardless of the fact that it was part of your job as an undercover agent. Additionally, thanks to your mediation, I was able to have this meeting with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. I almost want to embrace you and send you a bouquet of flowers.”

“Then—”

“However, I cannot make a definite promise in regard to your second request. Mimic is a horrifying group, after all. We’re still under a lot of pressure thanks to them. If I could, I’d rather just run away crying. It’s that bad.”

Ougai looked at Taneda with an indiscernible smile. A piercing flash of light illuminated the depths of Taneda’s eyes. He closed them before giving Ango a signal with his gaze.

“Next, the Port Mafia requests that the Special Division for Unusual Powers —”

Chief Taneda let out a short, deep sigh. Then he pulled a black envelope out of his suit.



Meaningless images swirled in my head. I was standing in a white, barren hotel room. Next, I was standing in the planted forest in front of the art museum again. After that, I was on the restaurant’s second floor.

—*“Sakunosuke Oda, a peculiar mafioso who believes killing is never the answer.”*

I was in the waste-ridden back alley, then the quiet bar in the middle of the night; then I was riding the elevator at the Mafia headquarters. After that, I was sitting in the seat by the window at the café on a rainy day.

—*“Writing novels is writing people.”*

—*“You’re perfectly qualified.”*

I wondered if that man with the mustache was serious about what he said. Or was he just trying to make me feel better? Did I really deserve to write about people? Even if what he'd said had been true, it was all in the past. I no longer had that right.

At the site of the explosion, I somehow managed to stagger to my feet and check inside the bus. I shouldn't have; it would've been easy to simply imagine what it was like inside. After that, I decided to leave the scene before it drew too much attention. I went over to the restaurant.

—*"They're an army."*

—*"These men don't know how to live outside of a battlefield. They're known as grau geists—men with no master."*

The lights were out; it was quiet.

When I went inside, I found the owner, Pops, dead.

He was lying behind the counter on a pot and the shelf for cooking utensils. He'd been shot in the chest three times, and his eyes were still open. His hand was still gripping the curry ladle. He must've tried to grab on to whatever was nearby on the spur of the moment. I wondered how he'd planned on fighting against armed Mimic soldiers with only a ladle. Just what you would expect from the owner of a Mafia-affiliated restaurant.

Only when I gently closed Pops's eyelids did he actually look dead. I could feel my soul being tightly *squeezed* out of my body. It was the sound the spirit makes when it is irreversibly disfigured.

A military knife was stuck in the counter, and underneath it was a map. After pulling out the knife, I looked at the map. It contained a drawing of some mountainous terrain not too far away. There was a red X on some old private property in the mountains with the words *Ghost Graveyard* scribbled next to it.

I was sure it was a message from Mimic—from Gide. I folded the map and tucked it away in my pocket. Then I headed up to the second floor and went into the hidden room that Pops had ready for me. An array of weapons for emergency use were stashed away in there.

I took off my clothes and put on a light bulletproof vest. Next, I slipped on a

shirt, then slid my arms through the shoulder holster and buttoned it in the back.

I checked both pistols. Once I'd finished looking them over, I wiped off the dust from one gun, oiled it, and assembled everything. I made sure the sight wasn't off. Then I took out the bullet and pulled the trigger, checking how it felt. After that, I loaded the magazine before inserting it back into the gun. I pulled the slide, sending the first bullet to the chamber. When that was done, I checked the other gun the same way before sticking them in the holsters on each side of my body.

Every precise movement I made was like a prayer. As I got myself ready, my mind separated from my body, and I wandered in my thoughts: who I used to be, what I'd sought, who I'd talked to, what I'd felt, how I'd wanted to live. All I knew in that moment was that everything I sought in the past was already gone—thrown away like a crumpled-up piece of paper.

I wrapped my wrists in bands packed with spare magazines. Then I slid my arms through the sleeves of the Kevlar-woven coat, into which I stuffed grenades and as many spare magazines as I could. I hesitated but decided to not bring any bandages or painkillers along. I wouldn't need them.

Instead, I found a box of cigarettes from when I'd quit years ago. I headed to the adjacent room with the cigarettes and a match. It was the room the kids used to live in—the same place where we'd roughhoused together just a few days ago. It had hardly changed: the bed railing colored in with crayon, the filthy floor, the stained wallpaper. The only difference was the five shadows that should've been there, too.

"Good night, Kousuke," I said as I lit a cigarette. That was the name of the oldest boy. "Good night, Katsumi. Good night, Yuu. Good night, Shinji. Good night, Sakura."

I watched as a trail of pale smoke quietly rose from the tip.

"Sleep well. I'll avenge you."

Holding the cigarette between my fingers, I gazed into the smoke until the cigarette burned out and the smoke disappeared.

I began to walk.

“Odasaku!”

I was stopped by a familiar voice the moment I left the restaurant.

“Dazai? What’s wrong?”

“Odasaku, I know what you’re thinking, but don’t. Doing that isn’t going to—”

“Isn’t going to bring the kids back?” I asked.

Lost for words, Dazai fell silent. Then he said, “Judging by the scale of past skirmishes, I have a good idea of how many Mimic soldiers are left. There’s a little over twenty of them, and they’re resting up for battle as we speak. They’ve most likely set up base in the western mountain district. I’m gonna go look into it, and—”

“I already know where they are. They left me an invitation.”

I handed Dazai the map with the inscription *Ghost Graveyard* that I’d found earlier. He furrowed his brows when he looked at it.

“They’re gathering their troops all in one spot. I’m not sure the Mafia can defeat them even if we mobilize all our men.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Odasaku, listen. The boss had a secret meeting a few hours ago. He met with the Special Division for Unusual Powers, and Ango was the mediator. The meeting was so secret that I couldn’t get any more information, but there’s still something fishy going on with this Mimic stuff. I can feel it. So until we know what that is—”

“‘Something’?” I looked at Dazai. “There isn’t anything, Dazai. It’s all over. Everything. Whatever else happens now is meaningless—just like what I’m about to do. Am I wrong?”

“Odasaku...,” Dazai said softly. “Forgive me for the absurd wording, but—don’t go. Find something to rely on. Expect good things to happen from here on out. There’s gotta be something... Hey, Odasaku, do you know why I joined the Mafia?”

I stared at him. We had known each other for a long time, but he'd never even attempted to talk about that.

"I joined the Mafia because of an expectation I had. I thought if I was close to death and violence—close to people giving in to their urges and desires, then I would be able to see the inner nature of humankind up close. I thought if I did that..." Dazai paused before continuing, "...I would be able to find something—a reason to live."

I looked at him; he looked back at me.

"I wanted to be a novelist," I said. "I thought I wouldn't deserve such a life if I killed someone during a mission. That's why I never killed anyone. But that's all in the past. There's only one thing I want now."

"Odasaku!"

I began to walk away. Dazai yelled out, but I didn't turn around.



Heading west, I started my journey.

Just like always, everyone walked in whatever direction they pleased. They all had somewhere to go, someone to meet, a home to return to. That was the world we lived in. That was the world I wanted to write about in my novel. That was the world the kids were supposed to belong to, where they'd each walk the streets however they pleased.

—*"They all found peace. Nobody can take that away from them."*

I recalled what Ango said that day long, long ago. Were the kids somewhere peaceful? Or had they become ghosts to wander the world of the living?

Just like Gide...and me.

As I was walking, I bumped into a small young man coming from the opposite direction.

"Whoa!"

Nothing happened to me, but the young man lost balance and fell on his rear. Everything he'd been carrying scattered across the ground.

“What d’you think you’re doing?! Watch where you’re going! With eyes that high up, you oughta be real good at that! Ugh... All the detective equipment the boss gave me...”

I helped the young man pick up his scattered belongings: recording paper, a pen, a camera, and a bag for storing forensic evidence. Maybe he was a forensic technician on a murder case.

“You a cop?” I asked for no particular reason.

“Me?” He squinted his already narrow eyes in utter disgust. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t lump me in with a bunch of incompetents! You don’t know who I am? Soon I’ll be a household name throughout all of Japan, so don’t you forget! I am the world’s greatest detective, Ranpo Edo—”

“Sorry about that,” I cut him off midsentence. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m in a hurry.”

“Hey! You’d be a real fool to throw away your chance to talk to this amazing detective! In fact, you won’t be able to resist once you see my skills in action! Allow me to show you so I can rid you of any doubts. Hmm, let’s see... The reason you’re in a hurry is...”

The cheerful, haughty young man cackled, then stared at me.

“You...”

His eyes suddenly narrowed, and the air around him instantly chilled. The depths of his almond eyes harbored an inhuman glow.

“You...” Unlike just a moment ago, the young man spoke in a whisper. “I’m telling you this for your own good. You must not go to your destination. Reconsider.”

“Why?”

“Because if you go.....you’re gonna die.”

I lit another cigarette, then turned my back to him. Heading west, I marched on once more. As I walked away, I responded to the young man behind me:

“I know.”



After heading down the forest road flourishing with oak trees, I saw a Western-style building. The first things that caught my eyes were the violet slate roof and the semicircle pediment with its religious motif. Basking in the evening sun, it idly stood out against the forest.

At the end of the narrow gravel path stood two Mimic soldiers with submachine guns. They must've been the guards.

"Can I ask you something?"

I casually struck up conversation as I strode toward them. The soldiers, taken by surprise, pointed their guns at me, but I'd already drawn my pistols from the holsters under my arms.

I fired two shots at once, one to the left and one to the right. The bullets buried themselves in their heads before shattering through the opposite side of their skulls. Their blood and brain matter splashed against the trees behind them, and they perished without really even knowing what happened. Their bodies hit the ground with a wet thud that echoed through the forest almost simultaneously. After putting away my pistols, I continued to walk without even looking at the bodies.

As I followed the pathway, I headed to the building's front door. I looked up at the attic space on the third floor near the rooftop on the other side of the lighting window. There was a sentry on watch holding a sniper rifle. Since I'd avoided his range of sight as I approached, he had no idea there was an intruder right below him.

I snapped my fingers to get his attention. When he followed the sound and noticed me, his eyes opened wide in astonishment. I put a bullet in his head before he could even get a hand on his rifle, and the sniper fell backward and crashed to the floor below with a bang. The soldiers inside had surely noticed that something was wrong now. I headed toward the porch, walking at my normal pace, then stopped to take out a cigarette and lit it. The murky smoke filled my lungs.

I stared at my hands—the hands that had just killed three people. They were my hands in every respect, no different from the hands that had avoided killing all those years. My fingers harbored no lust for blood. Neither did the trigger,

nor the bullets. The urge to kill dwelled deep within the reaches of my mind.

Soon a ruckus began to break out inside the building—sounds of yelling, running, and magazines being loaded. I slid to the side of the French front door and leaned against the wall next to the stone pillar. With my back against the hard stone wall, I reached out to my side and knocked on the door. Immediately, there was a rumble as if the ground had cracked open, and countless bullets shattered the door, turning it into nothing more than sawdust in the wind.

I looked out of the corner of my eye with both pistols at the ready. Five seconds. Ten seconds. After twelve seconds went by and the soldiers tried to reload their guns, I pulled the pin out of a grenade and threw it into the building. As the explosion blew out the interior, I spit the cigarette out of my mouth. Then, holding out my two pistols, I rushed inside.

Bullets soared through the smoke. I pitched myself forward onto the floor, firing twice. The flash from the guns lit the room up in white. After rolling forward, I shifted to the side and leaped toward the corner of the room while firing two more shots. Bits of plaster, spurts of blood, and smoke were illuminated by the gunfire. As submachine gun bullets hit the ground below me, I ran alongside the wall knowing where they would land. Numerous empty shells hit the floor, playing the music of war. Before long, I pulled my guns together and fired twice at the enemies in the room's center. Then there was silence.

All the soldiers that were in my way when I broke in had been taken care of. I surveyed the room. The entrance hall to the Western-style building, having been blown apart by gunfire, was now an atrium. The stained glass near the ceiling dimly tinted the dust and gunpowder smoke inside. Six Mimic soldiers lay dead underneath.

According to what Dazai had said, there were still quite a few enemies left. The bloodbath still had a ways to go.

I began to hear the footsteps of soldiers at the opposite end of the carpeted stairs. My skill allowed me to see only up to five seconds into the future; that wasn't enough time to figure out what kinds of traps and battle formations the



enemy had set up ahead of me.

After reloading my guns, I slowly walked up the staircase. At the top was a long, narrow connecting corridor. If the enemy closed in from the other side, I could take cover while putting up a barrage. I saw soldiers at the end of the corridor, and they immediately drew their guns. I decided to charge the enemy instead.

I rushed down the corridor; it was so narrow that I had almost no space to dodge. There were four enemies charging at me while firing submachine guns, the most optimal weapon at this distance. I bent forward and sprinted toward the Mimic soldier in the very front, then fired my pistol. His forehead took the bullet, bending him backward. Next, I swiftly rushed into the pocket and used the soldier's corpse as a shield while firing two more shots. A bullet fatally pierced the second soldier's throat. His fingers spasmed, causing him to shoot a line of bullets into the ceiling.

I kicked the corpse's sternum, sending it flying into the soldier directly behind him. While the third soldier tried to push the body away, I slipped to his side and struck him in the chin with my palm, then put a bullet through the top of his skull. Crimson liquid splattered against the wall. While the last soldier fired a submachine gun, I jumped to the side and dodged. Then I kicked off the wall once more to evade the line of fire horizontally pursuing me. Just as my leap took me right above the enemy, I unloaded the rest of my clip. I landed at the end of the connecting corridor. Only a brief moment had passed since the first shot. After another second had gone by, I heard the soldier collapse to the ground in the background. I only used the sound to confirm his death before once again continuing on ahead.

At the end of the connecting corridor was a spacious lounge facing the courtyard. It had a large fireplace with medieval-style decor, a red velvet armchair, and a war flag encased in a golden picture frame.

This mansion used to be the residence of foreign aristocrats. When I researched the place beforehand, I learned that the owner of this vast estate returned to his homeland after his assets had been confiscated with the spread of the war. Ever since then, the mansion's ownership remained up in the air as it patiently waited for an occupant who was never to return.

I stopped. I knew there was a remote directional mine up ahead, and if I went any farther, I'd get caught in the blast. My only option was to shoot through the wall to destroy it. I aimed my gun. The moment I did so, I realized my failure—there was another directional mine right behind me as well. Whoever was watching this place from afar must've decided that they'd blow up the mine behind me the moment I noticed the one to my front.

My skill allowed me to see the future, but *when things happened because I'd changed my course of action, I only started seeing the future from the moment I made the change*. Therefore, if there was a trap that would be triggered one second after I aimed my gun at the mine ahead, then I would only be able to see that future one second before it was triggered. This was one of those cases.

I lunged forward, and immediately the high-performance explosive behind me detonated. Shrapnel and the expanding fireball tore through my coat. When the blast slammed me against the floor, I immediately covered my head and stayed low. In a flash, the directional mine ahead blasted down the door, and the impact battered my body. It was a surprise attack that used my skill against me, coupled with a pincer attack from directional mines on both sides. This enemy knew the ins and outs of my “precognition,” both the capabilities and weaknesses alike.

I had a vision.

Soldiers came in droves, rappelling through the large windows lined up on my left side. However, I was still crawling on the ground, in no position to fight back.

I had only around four seconds before they'd arrive. It was sink or swim. I took my chances and fought to pick up my pistols. I felt a dull pain in my right side; one of the pellets from the explosion had buried itself in my flesh near my hip bone, which wasn't protected by my bulletproof vest. Blood stained my shirt. I saw ropes dangle from outside the window, followed by descending soldiers' shoes. I picked up my guns with a groan. Each window was smashed through as eight soldiers came swinging into the building.

There was no time to take cover. As the glass shattered in the air, I felt as if I could see the sparkle of each fragment. First, I shot one bullet out of each gun,

piercing the first two soldiers in the throat and head, respectively. Thereupon, the other soldiers landed inside. My coat fluttered in the air as I flipped over and lowered my posture before shooting two more bullets, finishing off the two closest soldiers. The remaining enemies aimed their guns at me. The fragments of glass finally hit the ground, creating countless bouncing gems of light.

Then the gunfight commenced—a shoot-out close enough to hold a boxing match. Gunfire filled the room, and my surroundings flashed bright white. Granular apostles of death soared through the sparkling world. I could see it. Leaning forward almost perpendicular to the ground, I avoided the close-range gunfire. Then I crossed my arms and fired two shots. I bent backward until my chest was facing the ceiling and shot two shots at the enemies on both sides. An impact to the chest sent me flying backward. A bullet hit my bulletproof vest, knocking the wind out of me as if I'd been hit with a cannonball.

My bullets missed one of the soldiers. I caught my fall by placing a hand on the glass-covered floor. Then I swiftly swept the enemy's legs as he tried to fire his submachine gun. Despite being midfall, the soldier reached out and grabbed my coat collar. He was planning on dragging me down to the ground with him.

This one moved nothing like the other soldiers. When I caught a glimpse of the badge on the lapel of his military fatigues, I realized he was most likely Mimic's deputy commander—Gide's right-hand man and chief of staff.

I tried to aim the pistol in my left hand at his throat, but he quickly knocked it away with the tip of his submachine gun. We tangled, then rolled on the ground. I threw my left palm at his chin in an attempt to give him a concussion, but he evaded, then immediately grabbed my sleeve and twisted it behind my back, apparently going for a joint lock. My shoulder made a dull sound. If he kept that up, I was sure my shoulder would be irreversibly damaged.

However, it's a bad idea to attempt close combat against someone with the ability to see the future. I'd wanted him to do this from the start. Grabbing my pistol with my free hand, I bent forward and unloaded the clip *into the floor*. The empty shells bounced off the ground with noises like small bells. The deputy commander's grip weakened, and he collapsed to the ground, a slug now buried in his throat. One of the bullets I'd just shot into the floor had ricocheted and pierced his neck. Gritting my teeth from the excruciating pain in

my chest, I checked over my bulletproof vest. I'd been hit in the torso three times, each shot stopped by the Kevlar. After removing the vest, I tossed it to the ground. I'd most likely fractured a rib.

"Guh..."

I turned around to find the deputy commander still conscious, but the wound was fatal. It'd be about another ten minutes before he died.

"Want me to finish you off?" I asked while aiming my pistol at his head.

".....Yes...please...," he replied in a feeble voice. His throat must've been full of blood.

"Any last words?"

"Thank you...for fighting me..."

The deputy commander closed his eyes. The gunshot wound must've hurt, and yet, he was faintly smiling.

"The commandant is up ahead... Please save him, too.....from this hell..."

I pulled the trigger. His skull burst, spewing blood and brain matter onto the floor. The deputy commander briefly twitched before going limp. I stood up and reloaded my guns. Then I began to walk.

"Yeah, I know."



Dazai strode confidently through the Mafia's high-rise headquarters downtown at a quick clip, his heels practically scraping off the carpet underfoot. He got on the glass-paneled elevator alone, pressed the button to the top floor, then closed his eyes. When the elevator reached his destination, he opened his eyes again. His gaze was focused on only one thing—the office at the very end of the hallway.

Dazai drew in his chin and began to walk. The large-built men in black suits guarding the door silently blocked Dazai's path. Both were carrying automatic rifles.

"Move," Dazai ordered without even looking at the men's faces. The colossal guards, twice Dazai's size, froze. Then they took a big step back, seemingly

intimidated. Without even waiting for the guards to react, Dazai opened the door to the office and barged in as if he owned the place. He then walked over to the large desk in the middle of the room and stopped in front of it. Seated before the desk was the Port Mafia's boss, Ougai Mori.

"Well, well, Dazai. It's not often you come here yourself. Allow me to bring you some tea. I received some extremely expensive leaves from northern Europe. Pouring this tea on top of a steamed bun makes an exquisite—"

"Boss." Dazai cut him off. "You know why I'm here, don't you?"

Ougai didn't answer his question, though. He just grinned mildly while staring at Dazai. Only after a few moments went by did he reply.

"Of course, Dazai. It's urgent, yes?"

"It is."

"Very well. Whatever it is you wish to do, you have my approval." Ougai gave a confident smirk. "I trust whatever plan the genius Dazai has. You have always contributed greatly to my and the Port Mafia's endeavors. I expect you will do the same today as well."

Taken by surprise, Dazai fell silent. Even he felt as if he were walking on fine blades whenever he talked with Ougai. If he made just one little mistake, he could fall off the path. After pondering to himself for a moment, Dazai said, "I need permission to form a small team of executive-level skill users to attack Mimic headquarters and rescue Odasaku."

"Fantastic." Ougai nodded. "At times, revealing your true intentions first can become the greatest tool of negotiation. Very well. You have my permission. However, I would like to know why."

Dazai stared back at the boss without breaking eye contact for even a moment. Ougai's narrowed eyes harbored a tinge of cleverness, as if they could see into his heart. It was the same kind of light that was once in Dazai's eyes when he looked upon his enemies or allies.

"Odasaku is currently scouting the enemy headquarters alone," Dazai said, keeping his emotions in check. "I sent an emergency response team of Mafia members to the area, but it isn't nearly enough. At this rate, we are going to

lose a valuable skill user.”

“But he’s our lowest-ranking member.” Ougai curiously tilted his head. “Of course, he’s a dear ally of ours, but is he worth sending executive-level men to the front line to save?”

“Yes,” Dazai confidently declared. “Of course he is.”

Ougai fell silent. He looked at Dazai, who looked straight back at him. It was an eloquent silence. The two men understood the other’s state of mind and how they would counter.

“...Dazai.” It was Ougai who put an end to the wordless debate. “Let me ask you this. I understand your plan, but in all likelihood, Oda *doesn’t want help*. What do you think about that?”

Dazai tried to answer, but he could not find the words to say. Ougai pulled an envelope out of the file cabinet on his office desk, then stared at it while he spoke. “Dazai, do you know what it means to be the boss? It means you are simultaneously at the top of the organization and still a slave to it as a whole. No matter what the cost, you have to get yourself dirty to keep the Port Mafia going. In order to deplete the enemy, maximize your allies’ worth, and keep the organization alive and thriving, you must also willingly perform any logically conceivable atrocity. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He placed the envelope on the desk. It was large and made of high-quality black paper with small gold inlays in the corners. Whatever was inside appeared to be extremely thin. Dazai’s eyes were inadvertently locked on the envelope. Suddenly, he caught his breath.

“This envelope—”

Something began to thrash and flicker in the back of Dazai’s mind. It gradually turned into physical shaking, causing his head to go numb.

“I see.” Dazai managed to squeeze out just those two words, his face deathly pale. “So that’s what this is.”

Then he turned on his heel and put his back to Ougai.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

“Where are you going?” Ougai asked.

“To Odasaku.”

Without turning back, Dazai walked all the way to the door to the hallway. But as he reached for the decorated handle, he heard several noises coming from behind—something that sounded like metal parts locking together. Dazai’s hand suddenly froze. Then, realizing his failure, he closed his eyes. With a soft sigh, he turned around to find four armed Mafia grunts who had noiselessly appeared from the adjoining room. They aimed their guns at Dazai, but he wasn’t surprised. He simply surveyed the room before fixing his gaze on Ougai, who hadn’t budged from his spot mere moments ago. He was still smiling at Dazai.



Just past the door ahead of the battlefield was a vast, high-ceilinged ballroom capable of fitting a hundred couples performing baroque dance. A decayed chandelier hung askew from the three-story-high ceiling. Both sides of the ballroom were dressed in crimson curtains with gold embroideries, which were ripped and coming undone at the seams, creating a gloomy atmosphere that seemed to resent the prosperity of times past. At the front and end of the hall stood two oak doors each. When I walked to the center of the room, I heard a voice coming from behind.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed...”

I immediately drew my pistols and turned around while pointing them in the direction of the voice. He stood before me—the handsome ghost with silver hair and clothes. Pointing my guns at him, I finished his sentence.

“...But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

The ghost squinted, then smiled.

“John 12:24. You’re surprisingly well-read, Sakunosuke.”

Gide stood alone before the oak doors. There were no traps. His men were gone. He didn’t even draw his gun.

The sight of my pistol was aimed directly between his eyes. If I even squeezed

the trigger a little, the bullet would shoot right at my target—right in the forehead of that faintly smiling man.

“Thank you for your hard work,” he said.

I pulled the trigger, but Gide moved his head to the side, avoiding the bullet.

“I am sorry for what I did to the children.” His expression didn’t change as he began to approach me. “However, it appears it was worth it.”

The muzzle of my gun followed Gide’s every step as he walked alongside the wall. I shot once more at his head. My skill told me he was going to swerve right, so I purposely fired slightly farther to that side. However, Gide swerved to the left instead.

“Your eyes are the same as mine.” He continued to walk noiselessly, a slight grin spreading across his face. “Those are the eyes of a man who has strayed from the path of life just like my men and I.”

Gide still didn’t reach for his gun. He didn’t even seem worried that I was shooting at him. A chill ran down my spine.

“Welcome to our world, Sakunosuke.”

Then, with no warning at all, he drew his guns and aimed them at me. I couldn’t react to the sudden movement, but not because I was surprised. It was because I felt as though he wouldn’t hit me even if he shot. With our guns pointing at each other, we stood in silence. The muzzles of our guns stared the other down.

“You sure talk a lot.”

“Then the talking shall end here.”

I had a vision.

Five seconds from then, Gide shot one bullet at my forehead and one at my heart. Which way should I swerve?

To the side? ...No, if I did that, then he would adjust his aim to the side.

Down? ...No, the outcome still wouldn’t change.

I had three seconds left.



That was when I noticed something.

—*Oh. Now it makes sense.*

One more second.

Rapidly firing both pistols, I charged forward at my opponent.

And just like that, all hell broke loose.

Gunfire illuminated the area between us. As we rushed toward each other, we continued to fire. A few bullets grazed my earlobe and shredded the hem of my coat. Using the back of my hands, I pushed his guns to the side. Gide then brought his arms back to the middle as if he were forming a circle. The *grau geist* spit fire toward my chest. We were so close that I could grab his nose. When he shot his guns from each side of my face in a parallel fashion, there was no way for me to dodge both bullets at once.

I made a split-second decision to turn my face to the left, avoiding the bullet on the right while using my pistol grip to block the other. A bolt of lightning shot down my arm through my palm, knocking the gun in my left hand away. On the other side of the gun, I saw Gide's lips tightly curl upward. He had two guns while I now had only one. I was clearly at a disadvantage.

—*Depending on where my remaining gun's aiming, that is.*

The gun in my right hand—the pistol I was still holding—was already pointed right at him. I pulled the trigger. Gide desperately tried to move out of the way, but we were too close. The bullet hit his left arm, spewing fresh blood behind him.

“Gah...!”

The gunshot caused him to slowly drop the pistol in that hand. Kicking off the ground, he leaped backward.

“How does it feel being unable to predict the future?” I asked while aiming the gun in my right hand.

“It is hard to believe that something so pleasant exists in this world,” Gide responded.

Regardless of the future seen and the action taken based on said future, the

opponent would *overwrite* it and adjust their reaction. There was only one simple, yet extreme way to solve this problem—just don't rely on your skill.

With only one pistol each, Gide and I faced off. Showing his teeth in a wide half-moon smile, he laughed. The expression on my face was probably no different.



Dazai calmly stared at the guns pointed in his direction.

"You still haven't had any tea, Dazai," Ougai said. "Come—have a seat."

Dazai didn't even budge. A guard in a black suit slipped to his side, then pointed the automatic rifle's muzzle right at his head.

"Odasaku's waiting for me."

"Sit."

Dazai glanced at the muzzle and returned to the middle of the room. Then he stood before Ougai and quietly stated, "I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wondered who was orchestrating the conflict between the Mafia, Mimic, and the Special Forces. But I arrived at a conclusion the moment I realized Ango was from the Special Division for Unusual Powers: They're the ones behind this. In the government's eyes, the Mafia and Mimic are just two bothersome crime syndicates. Having these two groups take each other out would be the perfect scenario for the Division, which is why they orchestrated it all. But *I was wrong.*"

Dazai briefly paused, then looked at Ougai.

"The one who painted this picture was you. You wanted to use the threat that the Mimic posed to help during your negotiations with the Division. Then you used Ango as a pawn for that scheme." Dazai halfway closed his eyes. "Boss, the reason you sent Ango to infiltrate Mimic wasn't to get information on Mimic. You knew *Ango was from the Division from the very beginning.* Am I right?"

Ougai neither confirmed nor denied the statement. "Oh?" he simply said in admiration.

"Various nuances of the truth change when you think about it that way. Ango

would give inside information on Mimic to the Mafia while also conveying information to the Special Division for Unusual Powers. Mimic is a group of ghosts in search of a battlefield. There is no way to negotiate or compromise with them. They pose far more danger than the Mafia, and if something isn't done, then they'll clash with government agencies before long. That's what the Division thought, at least. So they came up with a plan to get Mimic to attack the Port Mafia. Ango was used to leak intel to Mimic and manipulate the situation. If Mimic took the bait, then the Mafia would have no choice but to fight back. The Division believed that and gave Ango the mission...just like you wanted."

"You give me far too much credit." Ougai smirked. "The government agencies are like wolves before sheep compared with the Mafia. They cannot be manipulated that easily."

"That's why you went through the trouble of creating such an elaborate scheme. That's how much value that envelope has." Dazai pointed at the high-end black envelope in Ougai's hand. "You're right. The Division is like a wolf before sheep. No matter how much power the Port Mafia has, it lives in fear of angering the Division and getting snuffed out. That's why you offered to destroy Mimic in return for that document."

Ougai's smile deepened. Dazai approached him, then pulled a certificate out of the black envelope. It was elegantly written with the government's seal stamped on it.

"This certification permits activities as a skill-user organization—a *Skilled Business Permit*."



Gunpowder exploded and shells flew to the ground as the deafening roars of artillery fire filled the expansive hall. Gide's gun was pointed right at me, so I knocked it away with my elbow. A bullet soared right by my face, brushing against my ear. I swung my arm in the air and aimed my pistol at Gide's forehead. He swung his arm up from below, grabbing my elbow. Then he jerked my arm to the side, causing me to shoot and shatter the chandelier. Elbow and wrist against wrist and muzzle—we knocked the other's gun slightly out of line,

making each other barely miss with our shots. Bullets flew past our ears and chins. Countless gunfire created a wall of light between us as we stood close enough for hand-to-hand combat.

We pulled the triggers on our guns simultaneously only to find nothing was firing. Both of us were out of ammo. With our right arms still locked in place, we began reloading our guns. An empty magazine hit the floor. While Gide grabbed another magazine at his waist, I slid one of mine out from my wristband. He began to slide his backup magazine into the gun, but I knocked his right arm to stop him. Then I threw a left hook with a magazine still in my hand. The metal tore his skin, creating a red line across his cheek. Despite being knocked off-balance, Gide finished reloading his gun. I slid behind with my back pressed up against him, then threw an elbow while preventing him from firing. He dropped to his knees to evade. By the time I completed the elbow strike, I had already reloaded my gun. We aimed our weapons at each other at the same time, grabbing the other's right wrist with our left hands. The two of us froze in this strange position. My muzzle was before his eyes and his before mine. I was holding his gun with my left hand, but Gide was holding mine with his left hand as well: a muzzle in my left eye and a tenacious gray gaze in my right.

"Sakunosuke... You are incredible. Why did it take you so long to appear before me?"

"Sorry about that. I'll make sure to give you all the time you need today."

If I tried to break my wrist free from his grip, he would use that opening to shoot. But the same went for him. An odd balance of power kept us calm, allowing us to converse.



“Why did you stop killing, Sakunosuke?”

“Why do you search for a battlefield, Gide?”

I suddenly heard footsteps. It was the sound of many people running our way.

“Your men?”

“Your colleagues?”

The footsteps were coming from both sides of the ballroom. It sounded to be around ten people. If those were Mimic soldiers, I wasn't gonna be able to take Gide and them on at the same time. I'd have to end Gide the moment they came bursting in, then dispose of them. The footsteps gradually got closer until the oak doors were kicked wide-open. That moment, I broke free from Gide's grip. A gunshot echoed by my ears as gunpowder burned hair on my cheek. However, the bullet didn't hit me. Gide evaded my bullet with the same movement.

Our arms locked like hooks. Thanks to my skill, I already knew who was coming. At the door ahead were armed Mafia members, while Mimic soldiers were at the back door. They stormed into the room at almost the same time. As Gide and I bent at the elbows while locking arms, *I shot the Mimic soldiers behind him*. Pelted with bullets, they flew back. I was sure the Mafia men behind me were being shot in the same manner. I knew what Gide was thinking. He wanted to take out the intruders before anything else, as did I. He grabbed my lapel and pulled me, but I returned the favor. While we used each other as a fulcrum, I faced my enemies once more. I shot. Another Mimic soldier was knocked backward.

This was a ballroom. We stood in the center while empty shells hit the ground like surrounding applause. Using each other as a point of support, we continued to shoot our enemies. Leaning against each other's backs, we shot them. Our clothes fluttered in the air as we spun, swapping positions. Using the other's shoulder to rest our weapons, we shot more of them. Fresh blood from the soldiers painted the walls. Our shoulders intersected as we spun, shooting each other's allies.

The flames from the gunpowder and empty shells glittered around us. Both

Gide and I approached our limits as blood gushed from our gunshot wounds. My face turned pale and my vision blurry. Only my focus was sharp. We danced together around the edge of death—a place not of this world. My skill automatically showed me the future, carving Gide's next words into the back of my mind.

“What do you think, Sakunosuke?”

“About what?” I replied before he even asked.

But in reality, I didn't say a word because Gide heard my answer in a vision and replied before I could even get a word out.

“This is the world I searched for... I lived for this moment.”

We didn't actually speak because our skills were predicting what the other would say, and we would think how we would reply. The moment we came up with an answer, the other would foresee it in a vision and then come up with his own reply.

“What are you after?”

“Why did you quit killing?”

It was a brief moment of eternity—a short passage of time that hardly existed. Our visions and reality meshed, creating a world that transcended our world, making it impossible to know how much was real and how much was our skill. It was a world only we could exist in. It was a world we could find only through killing each other.

“I wanted to be a novelist. Someone once told me I should.”

“A novelist...” Gide smiled inside our still world. “I'm sure you could have done it.”

“Yeah.” Maybe there existed a world where that was possible. “This man I talked to gave me a novel. It was the last volume to a series I'd been looking everywhere for. Before I read it, he warned me that it was terrible.”

“How was it?”

“It was...”



“Boss, you started putting this scheme into motion years ago to get that license,” Dazai continued, standing in front of the boss’s desk. “I’m guessing this plan first took shape two years back when Ango went to Europe for business. You did some searching and found that Mimic would be the most promising enemy for your plan, so you had Ango contact them. I was wondering how Mimic escaped Europe and sneaked into Japan so easily, but the answer was rather simple. The Port Mafia helped them illegally enter the country. To send the Special Division for Unusual Powers into a panic and make them get off their butts, you *purposely invited the enemy organization to Yokohama.*”

“Dazai.” Ougai, who had been listening in silence, cut Dazai off for the first time. “What remarkable inference. There is nothing that needs correcting. I have just one thing I’d like to ask: *What’s wrong with that?*”

“.....”

“I told you—I am always thinking about the organization as a whole. Just like you see here, I received a Skilled Business Permit, so the government has more or less given us approval to conduct our illegal activities. And right now, Sakunosuke Oda is risking his life to eliminate a troublesome, violent group. It’s a win-win situation. So why are you so angry?”

Dazai didn’t say a word. That was just about the first time he’d ever been unable to articulate his feelings.

“I...”

—“*There is nothing worth pursuing at the cost of prolonging a life of suffering.*”

—“*Awaken me from this oxidizing world of a dream.*”

“I just...” His voice came out strained. “I just don’t get it. *You* were the one who tipped Mimic off about the orphans’ safe house. No one else could’ve found out about the location I chose. You killed those kids to get Odasaku to fight Mimic’s leader because he is the only one who can defeat him.”

“My answer is the same, Dazai. I will do anything for the benefit of the organization. Besides, we are the Port Mafia. We have always brought darkness, violence, and cruelty to this city. Why is that a problem now?”



Dazai knew. He knew Ougai's calculations, his mentality, and the rationale behind the plan. That was just the kind of organization the Port Mafia was. Logically speaking, Ougai was right, and Dazai was wrong.

"But..."

He turned on his heel, then began walking toward the door. Immediately, Ougai's guards pointed their guns at him.

"You cannot go, Dazai," Ougai called out to stop him. "Stay. Or do you have a logical reason for going to him?"

"There are two things I want to say, Boss." Dazai turned around and glared at Ougai. "First—you're not going to shoot me, and you're not going to have your men shoot me, either."

"Why is that? Because you wish to be shot?"

"No. Because it wouldn't benefit you in any way."

Ougai grinned. "True. However, you wouldn't gain anything by disobeying me and going to him, either. Am I wrong?"

"That's the second thing I wanted to say, Boss. There's nothing in it for me. There's only one reason why I'm going. *Because he is my friend.* Now, if you'll excuse me."

The guards placed their fingers on the triggers. However, Dazai paid them no mind and simply strolled to the door as if he were going for a walk. The guards looked to Ougai as they waited for orders. Without saying a word, Ougai crossed his arms while he gazed at Dazai's back with a faint smile. Then Dazai opened the door and walked down the hall until he could be seen no more.

✕ ✕ ✕

"The last volume was amazing," I said.

I'd never read a book that drew me in so much. Every word touched my heart, and I saw myself in every character. The man who gave me that book said it was awful, but I felt the complete opposite. I read it in one sitting practically without eating anything all day. The moment I finished the book, I opened it up again to read once more.

It felt as if every cell in my brain was reborn after reading that book. Once I'd finished it, the world I'd known before completely changed. Before that, all I had was killing. I would kill people for the mission—rob them of their lives. That book opened my eyes like the sun at dawn. That last volume had only one flaw. There were a few pages near the end that were torn out, so I never knew how one of the key scenes unfolded. It was a scene where one of the characters, an assassin, explained why he gave up killing.

There wasn't enough information on the following pages to guess why he did, and not knowing caused me so much anguish. Not only was that scene an important turning point in the story, but it was also crucial to understanding the assassin. The book was nowhere to be found new or used anymore, so I couldn't confirm that missing part. That man with the mustache never showed up again, so I couldn't ask him, either.

After worrying about it for so long, I came to one conclusion.

—*“Then you write what happens next.”*

I decided to write it myself. I would become a novelist and write a story about why the man stopped killing. But to become a novelist, I needed to sincerely know what it meant to live.

So I stopped killing. There was one line in that last volume right before where the pages had been torn out. It was something the protagonist said to the assassin.

*“People live to save themselves. It's something they realize right before they die.”*

I continued to think about what that meant after I vowed never to kill again. There probably wasn't any deep meaning to it. It was more than likely just a line to *connect* information with more information. But whenever I read that line, I thought back to the older man who had so mysteriously given me that book. Even now.

Did he know I worked as an assassin? Had he approached me to get me to stop? Was the reason he gave me the last volume, tore out those pages, and told me to write what happens next because he wanted to tell me to *save* myself? That was what I believed with almost no doubt in my mind.

He had told me his name the first time we met. I had forgotten it for so long, but it was only just recently that I remembered.

His name was Souseki Natsume.

The same name as the name of the author on the cover of that novel.

✕ ✕ ✕

“I was a hero,” Gide said.

Gide was in a war. He fought for his country and for justice. He fought for his friends who joined him by his side. During a past war that stretched the globe, he had made countless victories and saved countless allies.

Gide was a hero.

He was a soldier who protected his country, fought for its inhabitants, and believed that his destiny was to die for them. During a certain battle, Gide led a mere forty men into battle and conquered a stronghold of six hundred people. He defeated every single one of them and captured the stronghold.

However, that was a scheme thought up by his own allied base. When the country was already finishing up a peace treaty, Gide was used by military staff executive officers in an immoral ploy to crush one of the enemy’s key locations and rob them of their transport network.

Since peace had already been declared, Gide’s actions were deemed a war crime, and allied soldiers were sent to kill him for his betrayal. To ensure their survival, Gide and his forty men had no choice but to plunder the enemies’ equipment, become the enemy themselves, and break through his former allies’ siege.

Numerous soldiers came to kill the traitor. Gide and his men took the enemies’ pistols known as *grau geists*, donned the enemies’ military uniforms, and fought to the death against their fellow countrymen.

They mimicked the enemy soldiers and became the ghosts of the deceased. Gide and his men killed their pursuers to survive, but they didn’t have anywhere to live. They were criminals of war, dead men, a military with no master. From there, they wandered the lands. They took on dirty work as illegal mercenaries. These former heroes were no more. Their lives, which they were supposed to

lay down to protect their country, were used for no one. They just dulled their senses, dirtied their hands, and lost their reputation. Several men in the group even killed themselves. Gide didn't stop them; he lacked the words to do so.

But there were also those who didn't die. They were soldiers at heart, and they believed killing themselves would strip them of that right. They fought, suffered wounds, and lost their friends, but they still got back up. It was proof that they were once soldiers, that their blood still drove them to be such militants. They searched for a battlefield—a place to prove they were soldiers—a place that would help them remember who they were even if it meant dying. They became ghosts who wandered the battlefield. Their homeland and pride forever lost, they became spirits of the wasteland in search of an enemy.



Time was still extending endlessly. We continued to foresee and respond to what the other was going to say. Not even a second had gone by in the real world, where I'd just killed the Mimic soldiers while Gide killed the Mafia soldiers. In this world, I got ready to point my gun at Gide, who was surely going to do the same.

"The final moment is near," Gide said in that world of eternity.

"Tell me one thing, Gide," I said back. "Did you never want to go after something else? Couldn't you have changed how you lived your life somewhere down the line? Something different from searching for a battlefield or a place to die..."

"Change the way I live? There is no way I could have done that." Gide smiled. A glimmer of sorrow flickered within his eyes. "I promised my allies that I would die as a soldier. Nothing else was possible."

We pointed our guns at each other. However, in the world of eternity, we quietly faced each other and talked like friends. Gide looked at me. I could see the sincerity in his gaze.

"But...perhaps I could have changed my life at some point. Maybe if I had tried to change earlier in life, then perhaps I could have become something else...just like you stopped killing others. If I had the strength you had, then maybe one day I, too, could have..."

There were only two people in that massive hall still alive. Our muzzles each pointed at the other's heart. Gide wasn't wearing bulletproof clothing, and I'd taken mine off moments prior during battle. A shot to the chest would be fatal. The triggers had already been pulled. The bullets began to slide out of the barrels.

However, we just smiled, facing our partners as if we'd come to know everything about each other, like old friends after a long chat.

—*“They’ve observed that when multiple skills interact, on rare occasions they’ll careen off into a completely unexpected direction.”*

So this world was a *skill singularity*.

“I have one regret,” I said. “I never got to say good-bye to my friend. He was always there for me as ‘just a friend.’ He was bored of this world and always waited for death to come for him.”

“That man was in search of a place to die just like me?”

“No, not exactly,” I answered. “I thought you were similar to Dazai at first, rushing into battle and wishing for death without even considering the value of your own life. But he’s different. He’s sharp-witted with a mind like a steel trap. And he’s just a child—a sobbing child abandoned in the darkness of a world far emptier than the one we’re seeing.”

He was too smart for his own good. That was why he was always alone. The reason why Ango and I were able to be by his side was that we understood the solitude that surrounded him, and we never stepped inside it no matter how close we stood.

But in that moment, I kind of regretted not stepping in and invading that solitude.

The bullets left our guns' barrels and slid toward our chests.

“A magnificent shot until the very end.” Gide smiled. “I’m going to go see my men. Say hello to the kids.”

The bullets reached our chests.

The *singularity* vanished.

The bullets penetrated the skin, cut through our clothes, and exited out our backs. At the very same time, in the very same fashion, we both fell backward.

Just then, I heard footsteps.

“Odasaku!”

✕ ✕ ✕

Dazai rushed into the building and over to the ballroom, passing the myriad of corpses through the corridors along the way. When he burst through the oak doors, he saw his friend lying on the ground.

“Odasaku!”

“Dazai...”

Dazai rushed over to Odasaku, then checked his wounds. The bullet had pierced Odasaku’s chest, and a vast pool of blood had collected on the floor. It was clear that the wound was fatal.

“You’re such an idiot, Odasaku. The biggest idiot I know.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t have to do this. You didn’t have to die.”

“I know.”

Odasaku smirked with that particular satisfaction of accomplishing something worth the cost.

“Dazai... There’s something I want to say.”

“Don’t. Stop. We might still be able to save you. No, we *will* save you. So don’t say such—”

“Listen.” Odasaku wrapped his blood-soaked hand around Dazai’s. “You told me if you put yourself in a world of violence and bloodshed, you might be able to find a reason to live...”

“Yeah, I said that. I did. But what difference does that—?”

“You won’t find it,” Odasaku said in almost a whisper. Dazai stared at him.

“You should know that. Whether you’re on the side that takes lives or the side

that saves them, nothing beyond your own expectations will happen. Nothing in this world can fill the hole that is your loneliness. You will wander the darkness for eternity.”

—*“Awaken me from this oxidizing world of a dream.”*

That was when Dazai first realized: Sakunosuke Oda understood him much more than he’d ever imagined—right up to his very heart, almost to the center of his mind. Dazai didn’t realize until then that someone had known him so well.

For the first time in his life, Dazai wanted from the bottom of his heart to know something. He asked the man before him:

“Odasaku... What should I do?”

*“Be on the side that saves people,”* Odasaku replied. “If both sides are the same, then choose to become a good person. Save the weak, protect the orphaned. You might not see a great difference between right and wrong, but... saving others is something just a bit more wonderful.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. I know better than anyone else.”

Dazai gazed into Odasaku’s eyes and saw a glow of conviction.

It was clear that those words were supported by some sort of strong basis. Whether it was past experience or someone’s advice—Odasaku was trying to show Dazai the path he himself had once tried to walk. Dazai knew that.

That was why he could bring himself to believe it.

“...Okay. I will.”

“‘People live to save themselves. It’s something they realize right before they die,’ huh...? He was...right...” The color in Odasaku’s face gradually disappeared until he was almost completely pale. He smiled. “I could really go for some of that curry...”

With trembling fingers, Odasaku reached for the cigarettes in his pocket before sluggishly placing one in his mouth. By the time he pulled out a match, his fingers were too weak to hold it anymore. Dazai took the match and lit the cigarette for him. Then Odasaku closed his eyes, smoking the cigarette as he

smiled, filled to the brim with satisfaction.

The cigarette fell to the ground.

Dropping onto his knees by Odasaku's side, Dazai looked up to the ceiling and closed his eyes. His tightly shut lips faintly trembled. The smoke from the cigarette rose straight up to the top.

Nobody said a word.



## EPILOGUE

The conflict came to an end, and the city returned to normal. On the surface, the city was no different from before. The economy was good, people woke up and went to sleep, and the bustling days and violent nights continued on. Society and its underbelly appeared unchanged.



A light propeller aircraft glided through the skies over the coastline. There were only a few people on board.

“We’ll be arriving at our destination for the next mission in about an hour,” a young man in a suit said from the passenger seat.

“All right.”

In the reclining chair by the window sat a man with round glasses. In his hands were a few pieces of paper that he was diligently staring at.

“...Agent Sakaguchi, is that a picture of the next target?” the young man in the suit asked.

Ango, the man with round glasses, stuffed the picture away in his jacket pocket in a fluster so that his colleague wouldn’t see.

“No, it’s nothing. Just a personal photo of mine.”

After putting the picture away, Ango turned his gaze to the world outside the window, wistfully looking down at the city below.



Several shadows sprinted through the Yokohama Settlement’s underground aqueduct. Three Mimic stragglers had escaped to the dark channels. They survived because they had not been on the front lines during the battle at the Western-style building.

A dark cloth stretched out like a blade from behind and sliced one of the soldiers in half. The other two turned around and unloaded their submachine guns. Gunfire lit up the aqueduct, cutting through the darkness.

“...That won’t work against me.”

A boy in an overcoat appeared behind them. His black coat danced through the narrow passageway as if it were alive, tearing up the remaining soldiers one after another.

“I need to get stronger—I must reach greater heights! Until he recognizes me, I will lose to neither military soldiers, nor guns, nor even skill users! I will lose to no one! So take a good look! Behold!” Akutagawa shouted as he sped up the dance of death. His woeful screams were absorbed into the Yokohama night.



In the middle of a verdant mountain trail atop a hill overlooking Yokohama was a cemetery with a view of the ocean. There were many new graves lined up—among them a small white burial marker without a name.

Dazai stood before the burial marker, dressed in black mourning clothes and holding a bouquet of white flowers.

“.....”

He squinted as the strong sea breeze suddenly gusted past. The white flowers fluttered in the wind.

“I’ll leave this photo here.”

He took out a picture and placed it before the burial marker. Frozen in time were the smiles of those three men.

“I really wish you could’ve tried that hard tofu I made...”

Dazai closed his eyes, then stood absolutely still, rooted to the spot.



The blue Mafia headquarters building towered over the center of Yokohama’s most prime real estate. On the top floor of the building was an office. Ougai sat at his desk, resting his chin on his hand.

“*“Nihil admirari—help the man mentioned above without hesitation in the*

face of any and all trials' ... Hmph."

Numerous documents were scattered over his desk—loss reports of Mafia-ruled territory. On top of the clutter was the Silver Oracle that Ougai had once written. It had been recovered from the Western-style building after the conflict had ceased.

He listlessly picked up the document and stared at it. The subordinate standing to his side spoke up.

"Boss, it has already been two weeks since our executive Dazai went missing. We should probably gather all the executives for a meeting to decide his successor..."

"Yes... I suppose so," Ougai replied indifferently while creasing the document in his hands. "We won't have a meeting. I'm going to leave Dazai's spot open."

Ougai stared at the scattered reports on his desk. The organization had received an item of great value, something that more than made up for the total pecuniary damage and loss of talented subordinates. That included Dazai's disappearance as well. Logically speaking, the results couldn't have been better. Everything was going according to plan.

Ougai folded the document into a misshapen paper airplane. Then, with his chin still resting on his hand, he threw it. The deformed plane almost immediately crashed into the floor.

"Things sure are going to get boring around here..."



Colorful electric signs lighted the streets of Yokohama's entertainment district. The area was always bustling with people even through the dead of night.

Inside a certain pub that had an orange lantern hanging out front, there sat a large man with white hair, completely alone.

It was a popular pub for cheap drinks. The man drank out of a sake cup with a sour expression.

"I can't believe the top dog from the Home Affairs Ministry is drinking alone

at a cheap pub like this... Must be lonely, Chief Taneda.”

Taneda looked up in surprise to find a young man sitting across from him.

“You’re—”

“Allow me to pour you a drink.”

The cheerful gentleman, Dazai, tilted the sake bottle and poured the chief some alcohol. After knocking it back in one gulp, Taneda shot Dazai a sharp glance.

“I’ve seen your face in our reports more times than I can count. You’re a regular on the blacklist... So how’d you know I was here?”

“I can figure out most things if I look into them.” Dazai beamed with a shrug.

“You’re supposed to be missing... What brings you here?”

“I’m looking for a new job. Do you have any recommendations?”

Chief Taneda stared at Dazai in shock, but Dazai just innocently grinned.

“I find that hard to believe. There’s a long list of things I’d like to ask you...” Taneda scratched his chin with a finger. “Are you interested in the Special Division for Unusual Powers? If that’s the case—”

“You’d lose your job if I did that.” Dazai wryly smirked. “I don’t like places with lots of rules.”

“Then what kind of job are you looking for?”

“*One where I can help people,*” Dazai replied without a moment’s delay.

Chief Taneda crossed his arms and stared at Dazai in silence.

“Your record is too filthy. You’d need to lie low underground for a good two years to clean up. But, well...first, how about you answer a few questions? I’ve got an idea that could work.”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s an armed agency made up of skill users. It’s kind of a legal gray area, but they take on and solve troublesome tasks that the military and city police can’t. Their president is a sensible guy. It might be just what you’re looking for.”

Dazai nodded before closing his eyes as if he was contemplating something important. He opened his eyes again, full of determination, and asked:

“What’s the name of the organization?”

“Their name? The company’s name is...”

## AFTERWORD

Good evening. Asagiri here.

I ordered the late Sakunosuke Oda's favorite Osaka-style curry online and tried it. It was extremely spicy, but good. But also extremely spicy. My hand was basically glued to my water glass. The moment I finished, I started planning when I would eat it next. It was that kind of curry. I apologize to anyone reading this in the middle of the night.

Anyway, this is the second *Bungo Stray Dogs* novel: *Osamu Dazai and the Dark Era*. While *Osamu Dazai's Entrance Exam* took place two years before the comics, this novel takes place four years earlier and is about Dazai's life as a Mafia executive. The title inspiration came from the artist Pablo Picasso's first works (as a young man) known as the Blue Period. The author Osamu Dazai was rather wild in his younger years, but the Dazai in *Bungo Stray Dogs* had his own dark days as a youth, too.

Now, if I may digress.

The substance of this novel came to life because of a certain photograph. Authors Osamu Dazai, Sakunosuke Oda, and Ango Sakaguchi were part of a school of writers known as the Buraiha, or libertines. They would gather at a bar in Ginza, drink, and talk about the literary world, novels, their family, and everything in between.

There's actually a photo of them talking and having a good time that you can find at the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature (taken by the photographer Tadahiko Hayashi). Osamu Dazai is trying to act all cool with his legs on the stool, Sakunosuke Oda is facing the camera and smiling, and Ango Sakaguchi has a hand on his glass while listening to Dazai's story. They're so relaxed that it's hard to believe they're in front of a camera (especially when you consider that cameras back then were huge and the flashbulbs had to be

changed with every shot). You can really tell they got along. Not only are these three authors pillars of the literary world, but they seemed to be really close as well. I guess you could even call them “friends.” Such wonderful, sympathetic relationships aren’t easy to come by, and you can’t simply take them back if you lose them. That’s something even normal people like us can understand.

Then, only nine days after the picture was taken, Sakunosuke Oda passed away from a lung hemorrhage due to tuberculosis.

Osamu Dazai wrote “Oda! You did well” in his eulogy for the funeral. Not too long after that, he and Ango Sakaguchi also departed from this world, and now all that’s left is this picture of them. The starting point of this story came from what will never again return, something forever sealed within a strip of film.

As you know, the characters in *Bungo Stray Dogs* don’t share everything in common with their real-life counterparts. There are a number of discrepancies in the series’s setting that contradict historical fact (for example, it was actually Osamu Dazai who looked up to Ryuunosuke Akutagawa). I have no qualms with readers treating these as entities independent from the actual history.

However, my belief is that the faint glimmers these individuals left behind for future generations (such as the lines written in their stories, or that *something* within the aforementioned photo) are the very nature of a great author. So to stretch the point a bit, I feel as though this series wouldn’t be able to live up to its name—*Bungo*—without these glimmers.

Enough serious talk. I just wanted to express my gratitude to everyone for their support and love for the series. Thanks to you all, we are planning on a third novel. I’m going to be extremely busy releasing four comics and three novels within a year, but I really hope you look forward to the continuation of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my amazing partner Sango Harukawa for yet again drawing such beautiful illustrations and cool characters. I’d also like to thank the editors, advertisers, agencies, bookstores, and you, the reader! Thank you all so much.

Let us meet again in the next volume.

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