

Jorge Joestar

by

Maijo Otaro

based on characters created by

Araki Hirohiko

For Araki Hirohiko

ONE

Tsukumojuku
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My name is Jorge Joestar. The name was taken from my aristocratic grandfather but written the Spanish style. I asked why Mum didn't spell it George like a proper English name, but she just smiled and said, "Well, you were born in the Canary Islands, and if I named you George, we couldn't very well call you Jojo, could we?" My father – he died in a shipwreck – was named Jonathan Joestar, and had gone his whole life by the nickname Jojo; he'd died so soon after their wedding that Mum, still deeply in love with him, had her heart set on my inheriting that nickname. Sadly, only Spaniards lived on La Palma, and nobody called me Jojo; Mum and Lisa Lisa called me 'George' and everyone pronounced my name the Spanish way: 'Horhe'. Pointing this out to Mum just made her look sad, so I held my tongue. Frankly, what they called me was the least of my problems. For as long as I could remember, I was tormented by Spanish-speaking jackanapes – this very day they'd rubbed dog shit on my face on the way home from school. They'd managed to get some up my nose and no matter how much I washed my face the stink remained. But they'd been trying to make me eat it, so I guess I got off easy. Like she always did, Lisa Lisa found us and saved me before they could force the shit all the way in. These pigs were born on the island and would die a useless death here; they had no conscience, no capacity for anything like abstract thought, and thus no notion of restraint.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! You got saved by a girl again, Balsa Blanca (White Raft)! Your dick wouldn't even work as an oar!"

Lisa Lisa had knocked him down and kicked him a number of times, and his nose was still bleeding, but Antonio Torres was getting used to the beatings, and didn't let them get in the way of a good jeer. This hit me where it hurt. After the shipwreck, Mum spent several days adrift on the Pacific with me and Lisa Lisa, so Antonio and his gang had started calling me Balsa Blanca, but this insulted Mum and my dead Dad as well, so I always got mad and cried. Look, even I hated myself for it. I was such a damn cry baby.

It was like I had just served them all dessert. The moment I

started crying they all killed themselves laughing, and Lisa Lisa had to drag me away.

"Come on, Jorge! You can't cry like that! Now they've gone home happy!" Lisa Lisa was furious with me. I was in the river, trying to wash the smell off, and this wasn't helping. The snot and tears made my cheeks sting, but Elizabeth Straits showed no mercy. "Your face is filthy...washing isn't helping! You're so pathetic I don't even want to be seen walking with you! If you're so sad then go cry alone! I can't bear watching!" She turned and left me there. This made me feel even more sorry for myself. What did I ever do to deserve this? Because I was the only English boy in class... I hate to bring race into this, but all of us were white! We had an Asian kid in our class, but nobody ever made fun of him! Damn it! Why did they all pick on me!?

Obviously, because I was a crybaby, not particularly smart, not particularly athletic, and not particularly funny. The Asian kid was unflappable, quite good looking, got straight As, and word was he worked as a detective...in elementary school. Someone like that just isn't going to get picked on. But knowing there was a reason why they came after me just made things worse, and now I was crying again...

I was still crying when I got home, and Mum said Lisa Lisa had gone straight to her room and shut the door. "She was crying, you know? Lisa Lisa is very worried about you, Jorge. Such a kind soul..." For a moment I thought she meant me – I supposed I was on the kind side, for a boy – then I realized she meant Lisa Lisa, and got very confused. There must be some mistake. Kind? How? Violent, and sure, she saved me from the bullies but afterwards she always yelled at me a lot, and after she got done yelling, she'd walk away and leave me on my own. What about that was 'kind'? I was still fuming about that when we sat down to dinner, so Mum fixed me with a stern look.

"Jorge, we have something important to talk about tonight. Will you listen?"

There was a sadness to her smile that was very worrying, and I felt tears welling up reflexively.

"No!" I said.

"Don't be so dumb, Jorge," Lisa Lisa laughed. "She hasn't even said anything yet."

I turned to scowl at her for laughing, but she wasn't smiling at all. She looked really tense, and that really made me scared.

What was going on?

"Listen, Jorge," Mum said. "Look at me."

I really didn't want to, but I had no choice. This was clearly important. I had to face it.

"...what?"

She spoke slowly.

"A long time ago it was decided that Lisa Lisa was to go stay with her adopted father, Straits, once she turns twelve. The three of us will celebrate Christmas together, and then Straits will come to pick her up at the start of the year. Lisa Lisa will go with him to his home in Italy."

...what?

This was genuinely so far beyond all the bad news I had been bracing myself for that I actually blacked out for a second. Lisa Lisa had been protecting me my entire life, since I was a baby. She'd step in if someone hit me, get back what they took, give me hers or split hers with me if I dropped something, comforted me when I was crying, praised me if I did something right. There was no way they could take Lisa Lisa away from me now!

"But...but! But!" I said. "If Lisa Lisa leaves, I don't know what'll happen to me!" Actually, I was pretty sure I did know what would happen to me – they'd kill me. For real.

But Mum had no idea how bad things were for me. The tone she took was devoid of any comfort or reassurance. "Jorge. You have to become strong enough, smart enough, and resilient enough

to survive after Lisa Lisa leaves. You have to live without her help, and you have six months to prove you can. I know she's been a great help to you. Proving you can stand on your own two feet is the best thing you can do to repay her."

Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?

God, Mum was the best at...how could I put it? She had a way of saying things that were so right you couldn't argue, couldn't make excuses, and couldn't disobey without feeling like you were a very bad boy. But I was in such a fix that I didn't see how I could do the right thing! They nearly shoved dog shit in my mouth! Today! Just hours ago! Lisa Lisa was saving me from such dire straits on a daily basis! Mum had no idea! Mum had no idea she had no idea! In a state of panic I was about to cast aside all pretense of pride as a gentleman and use the dog shit as an example of just how bad this was when Lisa Lisa started crying. "Jorge, you idiot! Can't you think about anyone but yourself? I have to go live with my Dad, who I barely even remember! I'll barely ever see you or Mama Erina again! I'm so scared and I'll miss you and here you are just...to hell with you, Jorge!" She let the tears stream down her cheeks, making no effort to wipe them away, sobbing loudly. I stared, stunned. I'd never seen Lisa Lisa cry before.

Mum stood up, walked around the table, and put her arms around Lisa Lisa. "Aaaaugh, Eri...Mama Erina...wahh...hnk...wahh! S-sorry, I'm sorry. Hnk. I can't...I can't stop crying! I didn't want to cry, I swore I wouldn't!"

"Go ahead, Lisa Lisa, cry as much as you need. It's a very sad thing. It's hard for me, as well. We've lived together your whole life, and it's been such fun. We've been so happy. I've grown to love you like my own daughter. And I promise that will never change. Remember that always, Lisa Lisa. Know that I will always love you."

"Aaaah Mama Erina! Thank you! For everything! I love you too! I love you! Remember me forever! Don't forget about me!"

"Of course not! How could I forget you? You're my pride

and joy! I should be thanking you! Jorge and I have both treasured your company."

"Waaahh, I...I don't want to go! I want to live here with you forever! I'm sorry, I know it's selfish of me. But that's how I feel!"

"And you shouldn't be ashamed of that. Poor Lisa Lisa. Your life upturned by a promise grown ups made for you. But you have an important duty. This promise was made knowing the fate of all mankind depended on it. I'm sure someday you will come to understand, even if it's hard to accept while you're still so very young. But if you try, you'll get through this."

"Aaaaaaaugh! Nooo! I don't wannaa!" With Mum's arms still around her, Lisa Lisa began thrashing around like a toddler throwing a tantrum. I sat watching this, surprised, and more than a little nonplussed. Ah ha ha, wow, I thought. Lisa Lisa's just a kid. I'd never noticed before. But of course she was. She was eleven. Technically, at the moment I was the same age as her. It had always felt like she was a grown up looking after me.

But she was less than a year older.

Last year, she'd been only ten years old all those times she saved me, and now that I was eleven, I should be able to protect last year's version of me. Antonio and his friends had bullied me last year as well, but Antonio a year ago was much smaller than he was now, and not nearly as strong. But I was scared. Scared, but I could probably still take him. I was just scared. If I could just stop being scared, I could knock him down. The only way to stop being scared was to start being brave. I was a boy, and couldn't keep relying on a girl my whole life.

"Okay, Lisa Lisa!"

The panic was gone, and I sounded calm...or like I was trying to sound calm. My lips were still quivering, but I forced myself to keep talking. "I'll be brave. Starting tomorrow, I'll beat up Antonio myself. That might not actually happen, but I'll think of something. I won't need your help." I smiled at her. Now it was her turn to gape at me. Even Mum looked surprised, and maybe a little

dismayed. Neither of them believed me. Why should they? But Lisa Lisa blinked her red eyes, and a smile spread across her wet cheeks. "Thank you, Jorge. That was wonderful." I suddenly realized just how pretty Lisa Lisa was. It was like her whole body was sparkling, and I felt me heart skip a beat. "But don't try too hard. I don't want you getting hurt," she added. Yep. Nobody believed in me.

But I had to try.

I spent all night trying to figure out how to avoid Antonio's gang on the road to and from school, and trying to think of snappy comebacks – quite a step down from what I'd said at dinner, but all my plans were for naught.

Antonio Torres was found dead in the morning. He'd been murdered.

Since I was trying not to meet Antonio's gang on their way in from the harbor, and trying not to need Lisa Lisa's protection, I had gone to school very early. Instead of leaving my satchel in the classroom, I hid in a storage room around back of the school, waited for everyone else to arrive, and slipped into class at the last possible second. This was pathetic, but that was the best I could manage that morning. But as I stealthily opened the door and made a dash for my seat at the back I became aware of a bizarre silence; these clowns were always yelling about something, why were they quiet today? Still hunched over, I looked up. Everyone was looking at me. I froze in my tracks. The looks they gave me were not the usual mix of pity and scorn reserved for the class outcast. Instead, I saw fear and anxiety, and above all...suspicion. For reasons even I wasn't clear on, I immediately looked for Antonio Torres. He wasn't there. But his bannermen were all glaring at me.

"Oi, *Jorge*," His first mate, Julio, snarled. "What are you skulking about for? Where have you been, you Limey bastard!?"

"Hunh? What are you talking about? I came to school like always."

I couldn't very well say I'd been hiding in the storage room.

"Liar!" Julio yelled. "I went to your house this morning! I ran straight there! You were already gone at seven!"

"Hunh? Why'd you go to my house?"

Was he planning on tormenting me there, too? Please, no! That would be the last straw. Surely that was against the rules!

What Julio said next, I did not expect. "I wanted to see if you know anything about Antonio's death!"

Antonio's death!?

What!?! That piece of shit was dead!?

"...what are you talking about?"

"Then why did you lie? You didn't come to school like always?"

"I mean, I did come here a little early..."

"No, you didn't! You went and murdered Antonio!"

"Eh? Wait, what? What are you talking about? Antonio was murdered?"

"Don't play innocent!"

"No, no, I seriously have no idea what's going on! What? How could I possibly kill Antonio?"

"Not alone!" Julio roared, his eyes gleaming with rage and fear. "But if Lisa Lisa helped..."

"Lisa Lisa wouldn't kill anyone!" I yelled back. This was the first time I'd ever raised my voice to Julio. It made him jump, and he hesitated a moment before answering.

"Then where was Lisa Lisa this morning? When I went to your house, Miss Violence was missing, too!"

???? Hunh?

"Your Mom was having fits! Neither you nor that girl were in your rooms! You're telling me that both of you just happened to disappear the morning Antonio was murdered? I don't believe that for a second! You did something to him! I told your mother, if Antonio's been killed, then you two must have done it!"

"What? You said that to my Mum!?! You dick! You don't

even have any proof!"

"Nobody but you and the girl that protects you would ever want to kill him!"

"What are you talking about? I couldn't even begin to kill him. I don't even have the balls to fight him! I was trying to avoid seeing him, so I came to school early and hid in the storage room until class started!"

This admission was so pathetic and so like something I would do that everyone but Julio let out a relieved titter.

"Can you prove that!?" Julio demanded, despite having provided no evidence to back up his own accusations.

"I can," Mr. Hernandez said, stepping in the door. "I saw him from the teacher's room. Saw him go in the storage room, and come out. Julio, don't go accusing your classmates without reason. Judging from *Jorge's* behavior, and what you two just said, it sounds like you kids have been bullying *Jorge*. You, Antonio, and the rest of you...all ganging up on him. You should be ashamed of yourselves, hear?" Julio turned red, grit his teeth, and stared at the ground.

I was pleased he'd finally noticed, but he couldn't have done it sooner? This was exactly why I'd never expected help from him.

Julio wasn't quite done yet, though. "We still don't know where Lisa Lisa is, do we?"

With Mr. Hernandez watching, I was a little more confident. I allowed myself a theatrical sigh before answering.

"Listen to yourself. Lisa Lisa would never do something like this. She may be good at fighting, but she's a girl! She could never kill Antonio."

"Bullshit!" Julio howled. "She's no ordinary girl! You don't know, cause she's never hit you, but we all know! Her punches and kicks aren't normal! It's like electric running through you. It feels like your blood's running the wrong direction. She's got some weird power. She used her freaky power to kill Antonio! That's why he died so weird! Cause of that freak!"

"Hunh?" He'd lost me entirely. "Maybe you should calm down. Lisa Lisa doesn't have any 'power.'"

"She does, you just don't know it. She kicked me once, and my entire left side wouldn't stop trembling for hours. She punched Antonio the other day, and his legs started running on their own. He ran ten kilometers non-stop, all the way to the beach, right into the water, nearly drowned."

"What!?! That's impossible!"

"Whatever. You don't know. Useless talking to you. Point is, Lisa Lisa has some weird power. And you'd need some weird power to kill Antonio like that."

".....? What do you mean? How was Antonio killed?"

"You already know! Fine, be that way. You see..." Julio paused dramatically. "Antonio...was crushed to death, leaving him flat as a sheet of paper. Right behind his house. No blood, no muscle, no bones, nothing left of him but a sheet of skin!"

What the hell?

Was that really how Antonio Torres had died? If that was real, I definitely couldn't see Lisa Lisa being capable of that, but...? While I was still stunned, the classroom door suddenly slammed open.

"I've been eavesdropping! And I hate to admit it, because it does so spoil an entrance, but it's the truth! Everyone seemed so worked up I hesitated to enter, but not only did class never start, the discussion grew increasingly bizarre! Eventually it defeated even my patience." The boy at the door had a long, thick tube of some sort held under his arm. It was none other than the lone Asian in the class, Tsukumojuku Kato. The most handsome, most intelligent, most bizarre boy in class – when he walked in everyone, including the teacher, paid attention. He had that air about him.

Everyone watched as Tsukumojuku shut the door behind him, made his way to his desk, placed the cylindrical case on the

floor, and turned to face us. "Hmm...I could have sworn I just solved the Antonio Torres case, so why do I get the sense it's only just begun?"

We all gasped.

"Solved it!?" Julio shrieked. "What a load of crap! We found Antonio's body, and the police had only just arrived when we left! That was less than an hour ago! You're not a cop – how would you even know he was dead!? And here you are claiming to have solved the case!?"

"Because I did," Tsukumojuku said.

"But how...!?" Julio said, at a loss for words.

"You know that. Because I'm a detective, Julio Gonzales. I happened to pass the Torres residence mere moments after you came bursting out of it – some would say fate brought me there," he added, cryptically. Tsukumojuku turned to look at me. "But it seems fate is leading me in a different direction."

As I stood my ground against his piercing stare, I wondered how he could speak in such a grown-up, mannered fashion. Was he really eleven? No – he hadn't had a birthday yet, so he was only ten.

Then it struck me.

This was the first time I'd ever talked to him face to face.

"Um," I said, my voice shaking. "So...you solved the murder of Antonio Torres?" Was Lisa Lisa involved?

"So I thought."

Past tense? "So...you didn't?"

Instead of answering, he asked, "*Jorge*, have you ever read a detective novel?"

"...? A detective novel? Um...I think we have some in the house, but..."

"It's a genre of novels that began about sixty years ago, in 1841, when the American writer Edgar Allen Poe published a story called *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The salient points of the genre, obviously, are that the murder appears to be impossible, and is then solved by a genius detective."

"Obviously? How would I know that? My mum said they weren't for children to read. I don't like scary books anyway. What's your point?"

"But you understand the concept of a detective?"

"Like Sherlock Holmes?"

"Exactly. A fictional device, a role destined to always arrive at the truth in the end."

"So?"

"That's me."

"...okay? So what?"

"A detective surveys all evidence, understands the case in full, and at last arrives at a perfect solution."

"....."

"Looked at the other way, when new evidence comes to light providing details previously unknown...that solution is no longer perfect. And an imperfect solution is not the truth."

What the hell was this Asian on about?

Tsukumojuku stood up, and began moving around the classroom, closing the curtains. "A new world lies before us!" he announced. "Facts previously hidden from view! My solution was not complete! I was wrong! The case! Is not! Done!"

With each of this last exclamations he swished a curtain closed. In the darkened classroom, with all eyes on him, he returned to his desk, and picked up the tube he'd brought with him. "This is very sensitive to sunlight and dry air," he explained, and pulled something out of it. He rolled it out on the desk. It was Antonio Torres...only flat.

Holes where his eyes should be. Totally naked. Flat. Like paper.

No blood, no muscle, no bones, nothing left of him but a sheet of skin!

The very boy who'd said this let out a shriek of horror. "What's wrong with you!? Why would you bring a classmate's corpse here!? The cops are gonna be pissed! Oh god! Oh god!"

Tsukumojuku didn't bat an eye. "Hmph. I asked permission to keep it as a souvenir, and they granted it as a reward for solving the case. No one will scold me for it."

The flat Antonio Torres spread out on the desk had his chin up and turned slightly to the side, his eyes partly opened. He had no eyeballs, but it made him look like he was staring into the distance, lost in thought. His hands were held up in front of him, like he was trying to cover his bare chest, or trying to push something something painful away. His hips were swiveled to one side as if trying to hide his little penis, and his knees and ankles and toes were all curled as well, like he was dancing. He'd been tormenting me on a daily basis for years, but this...this was beautiful.

"Are you..." I said. "Are you sure...it's not a painting?"

"That is the solution I arrived at, *Jorge*. Or should I say Jorge...Jorge Joestar?"

"What are you talking about!?! That's his body! It's fucking groooooossss!" Julio wailed.

Tsukumojuku nodded. "That, too, is correct...but it is not the whole truth."

A stir went through the room, but by this time we were all under Tsukumojuku's spell.

"This is a work of art created by Antonio's mother, Maria Torres. She made it by peeling off her son's skin. The bones and blood and flesh were not removed; rather, the skin alone was peeled away, carefully placed together with adhesive, and hair shed over the past few months placed carefully on the head to complete the full body work of art. *This Year's Antonio*, she called it."

This was too much for all of us. I nearly forgot to breathe.

His voice shaking, Julio asked, "But...if his skin was peeled off...wouldn't Antonio die?"

"Normally, yes, if it was done all at once," Tsukumojuku replied, not at all perturbed. "So at first she would peel it away bit

by bit, treat it with oil, and sew the pieces together with very fine thread. But the result was rather patchwork, and the lines where it was sewn tended to bunch up, and it was obvious which pieces of skin had been harvested freshly; early versions weren't what you'd call beautiful. Maria adapted her technique, and her son's body adapted to survive it."

"Uh..." Julio swallowed. "You mean...there's more than one?"

"Yes," Tsukumojuku nodded. "She's been making one a year since Antonio was a baby, so including this year's, there are twelve in all. The early ones are not well done, but starting with last year's, they become rather remarkable. This year's, in particular, is a bona fide masterpiece."

".....!"

With Julio at a loss for words, someone else mumbled, "So horrible...his own mom...how could she? It's unnatural!"

"Her love for her son was hardly 'natural,'" Tsukumojuku said. "Since the invention of the photograph, Kodak cameras have become readily available. La Palma may not have a camera shop, but there's one in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. But Maria wanted the skin. It was the texture she loved, I suppose. No photograph can preserve that. Before the police took her away, Maria ran her cheek against it, desperately trying to savor her last moments with her art."

I could hear several of my classmates throwing up, their vomit splattering on the floor. Yet those next to them failed to react in any way.

I was staring closely at *This Year's Antonio*, but I couldn't see any sewing or patches at all. Where they on the inside? But I didn't dare touch it to see... "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Tsukumojuku said, standing beside me. "There's only one seam in it, running down his back from his neck to his rear."

Hunh?

"But...isn't this a skin quilt?"

"Heh heh, a quilt? That's one way of putting it. But that only applies to the early ones. Like I said, she improved her technique, and her son's body adapted to it."

".....?"

"Every summer his mother would peel off his skin. Even if she was careful not to peel enough to kill him, stripping random pieces off would have been very painful. He needed some defense against this. All cells in the human body are replaced every seven years; but our skin is replaced once a month – and in Antonio Torres' case, three days before June 16th – Maria's customary skinning day – his skin cell production would speed up. All Maria needed to do was make a single incision along his back, and Antonio could slip out of his old skin. His new skin would be thin, but fully grown; he could shed his old skin like a snake. Then Maria would apply a thin coating of oil to the cast-off skin, inside and out, to prevent it drying out, and seal the rear incision with medical adhesive. That's how *This Year's Antonio* was made," he said, like a waiter explaining a recipe.

"So the real Antonio Torres is still alive?" I asked. If this wasn't a corpse, but a cast-off skin, then the rest of Antonio must be somewhere. And I would have to form a new strategy for avoiding Antonio.

Tsukumojuku smiled awkwardly. "I assumed he was..." He turned to face the classroom door. "You may enter," he said.

'May'? Quite the haughty choice of words. I turned to look at the door as it opened. Antonio Torres was standing there, expressionless. His comrade Julio took a step forward to greet him, but...

"Wait! Stay back!"

Tsukumojuku's bark was so loud Julio jumped, and froze in his tracks.

I was certainly on edge at being suddenly confronted by a not-so-dead Antonio, but at the same time...something seemed wrong. Antonio usually laughed raucously; talked down me, his

friends, and grown-ups, bossing everyone around; he was always on the move, never settling down, his eyes sending sharp glances in all directions. Now he just stood there in the door, vacantly, doing nothing. I'd never seen him so still. Normally, Antonio would have burst in the door, and he would never have waited outside, even if Tsukumojuku ordered him to. But here he was, standing silently, not moving at all.

Even as I wondered, Tsukumojuku said, "You didn't say a single word to me on the way to school, Antonio. I assumed you were in shock – your mother had just been arrested, after all. But I was wrong, wasn't I? I thought you smelled a little ripe, but good manners prevented me saying anything...this, too, was a mistake. Were there, in fact, two versions of *This Year's Antonio*?"

The thing standing there was not Antonio, alive. I knew that. Antonio would never act like this.

"Would the person inside kindly step out?" Tsukumojuku said.

The rest of the class finally realized that the thing in front of us was someone else wearing Antonio's cast off skin. Julio and his cronies all took a big step back.

"I have a very good sense of smell. Despite the stench of the skin, I can clearly smell the shampoo you've used," Tsukumojuku said. "I can't name the brand...but it's the same shampoo *Jorge*...Jorge Joestar uses."

.....? ??? Hunh? "What.....?" I stammered.

'Antonio Torres' sighed.

"There are things you're better off not knowing, Detective," a girl's voice said.

A voice I knew.

"I didn't want to frighten the children," she said. Antonio's back split open, and Elizabeth Straits emerged from within.

Aaaaaaahhh! The whole class screamed. I couldn't scream.

As she came out of Antonio's skin, Lisa Lisa looked so beautiful. Even more beautiful than I'd thought the night before. Wow, Lisa Lisa really is amazing, I thought. A strange realization that left me weirdly calm.

Tsukumojuku said nothing, but his eyes shone with keen interest, watching her closely. She tossed Antonio Torres aside, wearing nothing but a corset and her underwear; nearly naked, but not at all embarrassed. She seemed supremely comfortable – she was like the women in the theater or printed advertisements, just smaller, and not yet as curvy.

"Wh-what's going on here? Everyone stay quiet, I'll take care of this," Mr. Hernandez said, and went out into the brightly lit hall.

Lisa Lisa ignored him. She pulled her dress out of Antonio's bag, and put it on.

"My name is Elizabeth Straits," she said. "I'm a student at this school, a year ahead of you. What I'm about to say is very important. The person who murdered Antonio Torres is hiding somewhere nearby. The police and militia are searching for him, but we will need all of your help. We won't ask you to do anything difficult, or dangerous. Quite the opposite – for your own safety, follow these simple instructions to the letter. First, you will all be summoned into the yard, where they will explain exactly what I'm about to say. From there, you must go straight home. Don't stop to play, and make sure you pick a route that will keep you in direct sunlight the entire way. You are not to stop anywhere. Don't go in any shops, don't go to your friend's homes, don't step in the shade of any trees, and avoid going near the coast at all costs. I say this because we know the killer will be hiding in the shadows during the day. To remain safe, it is important that you all remain in the sunlight, and go straight home. Whatever you see, and whoever invites you to join them, pay no attention. Just go home."

Lisa Lisa had her fist held out in front of her, her index finger raised. We listened in silence, but the meaning of her words

was lost on us. The heat of summer was finally dying down, and all of us wanted to play outside. I had to avoid the main play spots like the park or the beach for fear of bullies, but even so, I wanted to at least go to the library or the candy store.

But Lisa Lisa raised another finger, oblivious to our discontent. "Secondly, once you have reached your homes, without ever leaving the sunlight...lock all the doors and windows. Don't step outside again. If anyone knocks, do not open the doors. Don't even answer. Sit absolutely still, not making a sound, until they give up and go away. No matter how well you know them, no matter how rude you feel this is...today alone, you must do this. The police have given everyone these same instructions, so anyone knocking should know better. Today is a day when nobody except your family is allowed inside your homes. Today you must all play quietly at home."

Except if the doors and windows were all shut it would get unbearably hot...? And saying at home sounded very boring.

Others in the class were starting to grumble, but Lisa Lisa ignored them. "Third! Once the sun goes down, let no one in. Not even family. If everyone fails to get home before sundown, then gather in the center of the house with everyone who did come home, and hide. If the missing people or anyone else arrive, don't speak to them. Don't answer if they call. Stay hidden until morning. Once the sun has fully risen, sneak out of the house, and go to the police station, or finds some policemen or militiamen patrolling."

Lisa Lisa now had three fingers raised, and her orders were becoming so unreasonable the grumbling grew louder. "Be quiet and listen," Lisa Lisa snapped. Everyone shut up instantly.

"Fourth," she said, raising her last finger. "At some point this evening, you may hear a commotion from a house near yours. Loud voices, sounds of fighting, even screams. Don't go and see what's going on. If you hear strange sounds or voices, do exactly as I said before; hide in the center of the house with your family, and wait for morning. Don't speak to anyone. Don't make any sound.

Wait for sunrise."

.....! What was going to happen tonight?

As the meaning of Lisa Lisa's instructions settled in, panic spread. Some of the girls started to cry.

"Are you done?" Tsukumojuku asked. He'd been listening attentively this whole time.

"Yes."

"So...someone murdered Antonio Torres. This someone...is weak to sunlight, but once the sun has set, there is a strong chance they will attack others at random," he said, summing up the facts. Now I was starting to get scared. Tonight was going to be really really scary. Lisa Lisa was super cool, but also super vague...and not exactly building my confidence.

"So what are you?" Tsukumojuku asked. "Since *This Year's Antonio* is here, the skin you wore must be Antonio Torres' actual corpse."

Bleeggghh. I didn't want to believe it. I looked down at the skin on the floor. Why would she do something so horrible?

"You made it look as if Antonio Torres was still alive. Not for my benefit," Tsukumojuku continued. "You were trying to catch the killer's attention, and confuse him."

"Yes. And not just that..."

"You were also trying to lure him out of hiding."

"Exactly."

"Then it appears to be working. Your sunlight-hating killer is already here."

Lisa Lisa turned, following his gaze.

The hallway had been drenched in sunlight a minute ago, but was now dark and gloomy. The curtains had been pulled. We could hear the sound of more curtains being pulled down the hall. As scared as I was, somehow I found myself opening the door, and looking out into the hall. The man closing all the curtains was Mr. Hernandez.

Why would he...?

"Mr. Hernandez?" I called. He stopped in the sunlight, his hand on a curtain, and turned towards me. There were cracks running across his face; pieces of it were crumbling away. There was a big hole in his forehead. The girls behind me began to shriek. "Aiiiiieeee!" "Mr. Hernandez!" "What's going on!?! No! No! No!"

Shnk. He closed the curtain.

As he moved into the sunlight to close the next, his face crumbled further. Not just his head, his entire body was crumbling away. This wasn't 'weak to sunlight'. The sun was killing him.

Shnk.

As we watched him close the curtains, Tsukumojuku spoke to Lisa Lisa. "So Antonio Torres really did have his blood and flesh and bones sucked out...now what, exactly, could do that to him? I was working on the assumption that nobody could....but that simply means no *human* could. But that assumption was wrong, wasn't it? We're not dealing with a human."

"....."

"Let me ask again. You've summoned this thing here...so what are you? What power do you have?"

I turned to look at her.

I didn't know this Lisa Lisa. She looked right at me. "Since I was a tiny baby, I've been able to breathe in a special way – just like my adopted father, and, Jorge...like your father."

"What...?" I asked. I'd never heard of this before.

"As a baby, I found myself in a situation even more dangerous than this one. I think I chose to learn how to breathe like this to protect myself."

"Breathe how?"

"My breathing gives me power, Jorge. I promise I'll protect you."

This made no sense, but she flashed a smile at me, and stepped past me into the hall. The last curtain had been drawn, and the hall was shrouded in darkness.

Mr. Hernandez stood perfectly still, clutching the last

curtain. He was clearly no longer alive. His head was completely gone, his left arm had fallen off, his waist had crumbled and his guts fallen on the floor, and the rest of him was crumbling into dust. He was dead. And he'd been dead the whole time he was closing the curtains.

I had no idea how this could be.

But I knew Mr. Hernandez had been human when he was with us, and I knew he had been desperate to close those curtains, but closing the curtains had killed him...so he had been closing those curtains for someone else. Someone who hated sunlight. Who had killed Mr. Hernandez, and forced him to make a path.

I'd never imagined anything like this possible, but I knew it was true.

"Jorge, take a few steps back, please," Lisa Lisa said, staring into the darkness. "If you get too close you'll get shocked."

Oh? I took a step back, but Tsukumojuku stood his ground. When I glanced at him, he said, "Experience is everything."

I was scared. But I couldn't tear my eyes off Lisa Lisa.

"He's here," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Mm? Hmm?" Tsukumojuku said, peering into the depths of the hall. "Did Antonio have an older brother?"

No. "What do you...?"

"There's a young man who looks just like Antonio Torres... standing on the ceiling."

What?

I wanted to see but I wasn't going out there. I couldn't move a muscle.

"Señorita," a voice said, apparently addressing Lisa Lisa. The voice had a strange sweetness to it, that made me feel dizzy. "Have you seen my son?"

Son?

"He's all right looking, but such an awful brat. I didn't like his guts so I ate him whole, but then I heard he went to school this morning. I know he can't be alive, so this is quite odd."

He...ate him?

I looked down at the floor, where Antonio's skin lay.

"You mean the little turd that picked on my brother?" Lisa Lisa said. Her voice was trembling! "Don't worry. He's dead."

"Mm? Is he? Was I mistaken?"

"I think he's better off dead. I mean, his mother's a pervert who enjoyed peeling his skin off, and his father's such a terrible father he ate his own son. Dying must have been a relief."

"....." The man fell silent, but I heard a sound: fushhuuuu like a long breath.

"Alejandro Torres, if you had been a better father, my precious Jorge Joestar might never have been tormented by your piece of shit son. You will pay the price for that."

Suddenly, I remembered the promise I'd made last night.

The only way to stop being scared was to start being brave.

I was a boy, and couldn't keep relying on a girl my whole life.

Yet here I was cowering behind Lisa Lisa's back.

Fshuuuuuuuu. That sound again. Inhaling through his nose.

He spoke. "You shouldn't talk to grown ups like that, young lady."

Lisa Lisa snorted. "First you go skulking around pretending to be Spanish, now you're pretending to be a gentlemen? Stupid."

Her voice was still trembling. I was sure her whole body was shaking like a leaf.

But she was facing him. Conquering her fear.

All I was doing was trembling. Nothing else. I was letting her do everything.

"Shut that filthy little mouth! I'm going to empty out your guts next!" The man screamed. Thunk thunk thunk thunk! Footsteps coming down the ceiling.

Lisa Lisa took a quick, deep breath, and started running.

No. It was my turn.

I ran after her.

"Ah, wait, don't be stupid!" Tsukumojuku called after me, but I didn't stop. I raced down the hall, chasing after Lisa Lisa.

Her back looked so small, her shoulders so frail. I had to get in front of her.

The young man on the ceiling definitely looked just like Antonio Torres, but there were long pointy teeth sticking out of his open mouth, threatening Lisa Lisa.

"I'm gonna eat ya! Eat ya right up, little girl! Wahahahaha!" Laughing wildly, his feet left the ceiling. He spun in mid-air, lunging towards Lisa Lisa.

"I am Jorge Joestar's guardian! I fight to protect his beautiful blood line! Breathe, Lisa Lisa! Indigo Blue Overdrive!"

Her voice started as a whisper, and ended as a shout, her fist swinging forwards...just as I passed her, and, empty-handed and without plan, yelled, "Hey! Don't ever hit a girl!" and put myself between Lisa Lisa and that horrible man.

My sudden appearance caught Lisa Lisa off guard. Our eyes met for a second, but her fist didn't stop. Her lips parted to say something, and her fist hit the floor just as the man with fangs landed, and looked at me.

A ripple ran across the floor, a circle filled with some complicated pattern. When it hit the sinister young man, it knocked him back, and he instantly crumbled, like sand or ash.

"Ooooooh! Wow, Lisa Lisa!" I yelled.

"You idiot!" she shrieked, still surprised. A second later my back hit the floor, and a shock ran from my head down to my toes like I'd just been struck by lightning. I passed out.

When I woke up, it was the next morning, and everything was over. Straits was standing by my bed, and explained that the remains of Antonio and Alejandro Torres had been cleaned up, that everyone had spent a terrifying night hiding in their homes while

Straits and his friends went around the island killing monsters like Alejandro, and that they were confident the island was safe and La Palma could return to normal as soon as the sun rose.

"And Lisa Lisa?" I asked.

"She was out all night working with us. She's exhausted, and fast asleep."

"...is she mad at me? I messed up again, and got in her way."

"...Jorge, the Joestars have never hesitated to put themselves in danger, and you are no different. But you're still very young. Not everything you attempt will succeed. Grow up to be a fine young man, true of heart, and strong in spirit."

"...do I have a power like Lisa Lisa's?"

"...do you want it?"

Did I want it? I shuddered at the very thought.

"Antonio's father had fangs. And was...too young. And he could walk on the ceiling. He said he ate Antonio."

"Yes."

"You fight monsters like that, Straits?"

"We do. And we train hard so we can have the power we need to fight them."

"...I'm scared. I never want to see anything like that again. If I ever did...I'm sure I couldn't move a muscle. My legs would freeze, and he'd eat me alive. I don't want that. I'm scared of that happening. I don't want to go anywhere near anyone like that again. I don't want power like Lisa Lisa's." As I said this, I felt so pathetic I started crying. At the time, the fear had left me, but it all came flooding back. A heavy sort of fear, that made it hard to breathe; I was panting through my sobs. I was mad at myself for crying in front of Straits, but at the same time I thought, look how pathetic I am, how can anyone ask me to fight? Lisa Lisa is much more brave, let her handle it.

I was awful. And that just made me cry harder.

"But you did move, didn't you?" Straits said, patting me on the back. I didn't say anything. What I'd done was just dumb. I was

embarrassed.

Straits and company decided to stay in La Palma until it was time to take Lisa Lisa with them to Italy. They said they'd started her training in earnest while chasing the monsters. I didn't want to hear about it, so I didn't ask. I couldn't meet Lisa Lisa's eye, and she spoke to me less and less, and the mood in the house got so grim I was almost looking forward to her leaving.

While I was still at home recuperating, Tsukumojuku came to visit. When I asked how things were at school, I heard I was hardly the only one absent due to shock. Julio, on the other hand, had come every day, and largely taken over Antonio's role. He'd made it sound like he had no plans to continue persecuting me, though.

"Elizabeth mentioned it in passing, but apparently the Torres family were actually English. I looked into it. Their real name was Hightower. Antonio was born Anthony, and Alejandro was actually Alexander. They simply changed their names to seem more Spanish. They'd been in the railroad business in England, gone bankrupt, and washed up here...and with that history in mind, he may have targeted you."

"....." I had no response to that. It was all over. The Torres family had come to the Canary Islands broken, and had met their fates. La Palma was a bright, happy place; I still found it hard to believe such darkness had lain hidden in the shadows, or that Alejandro had really walked on the ceiling, fangs bared. "Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"Coming to visit."

Tsukumojuku made a face. "Yeah, well...when it all went down, I couldn't do anything."

"Ha ha, so? I don't care about that. I've never really had a friend. Nobody's ever come over to play."

"...oh. Sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"But, truth is, I think I've treated you rather coldly."

"? Hunh? You did? I never really noticed. Why? ...because I'm English?" I braced myself, expecting to be told he just didn't like me.

But what he actually said made no sense. "Because I was a detective."

? "...was? I don't really get it, but...aren't you still?"

"Maybe. But I'm not longer sure. And you can't call yourself a detective if you aren't sure."

"...hunh."

"Heh heh, not a care in the world, have you, Jorge Joestar? But I don't think you'll be able to lay back and let things wash over you forever."

".....?"

"The time is drawing near. Let us talk about 'certainty'. I call myself a detective. And I am perform the role well. I have my failures, and make mistakes, but I remain calm. Why? Because I am certain that I am a detective, and will solve the case. That is why I never hesitated to call myself a detective. You understand? In my mind, the word 'detective' is an honor. One others use to describe you, not something you ordinarily use to describe yourself. Artists don't normally call themselves masters, or geniuses. They don't describe their own work as masterpieces. Describing yourself as a detective is normally just as comical."

"...um, I guess so? But it didn't strike me as strange when you called yourself a detective."

"That's what's weird. Why do we feel like I won't get it totally wrong? You, others, even me. The cases a detective gets mixed up in are always extremely complicated, and filled with surprises. The criminals always use elaborate tricks, and there's always at least one last minute plot twist. It should be completely impossible to reach the truth without any mistakes. Maybe once,

but every time?"

"Mm...but you said you do make mistakes."

"Yes. But in the end, I always find the truth, and solve the case."

"Isn't that good?"

"But isn't it also weird?"

"Um...are you under a lot of pressure? You mean everyone expect you to succeed, and that's getting you down?"

"Not once. I've never felt pressured. I always find the truth."

"Hunh. So what's the problem?"

"That's my point! There is no problem, and that's the problem! I'm just a ordinary boy. Guaranteed success should be completely impossible."

"So even though you always succeed, you think it's weird that you do?"

"Exactly," Tsukumojuku said, very earnest. "Human beings do not generally have such clearly defined roles."

"Mm...so you think you lack modesty?"

"No. I think I have no need of modesty. I'm confident that lack of modesty will never be a problem for me."

"...so everything always goes your way, and you know it will?"

"Yes! I think we're getting somewhere," Tsukumojuku said, watching me intently. "My 'certainty' comes from that. I don't *believe* the world was made for me; I *know* it was. I'm not talking about the small boost to confidence than comes when things are going well for you. I mean I was chosen by the god of this world. And I know that I was. That's why I can call myself a detective without a trace of shame, and have that cause no problems at all."

".....uh.....well, you've been very lucky. But I don't see that this is a bad thing."

"We're drifting away from the point again, so let me say this, Jorge Joestar. I've been playing the role of the detective all this time, and I know exactly how it feels. Something like this cannot

occur without the arbitrary will of a 'god'. I have something watching over me, something like a god, yet not God."

"?ah ha ha, people do say, 'God is with us.'"

"Gods do not care about the individual. They don't play favorites. Even if they do give someone a role to play, they would not manipulate matters to the point of disrupting the natural order. What I have has the power of a god, but one that works only for me."

"....."

"Let me say exactly what I mean. Say that I'm Sherlock Holmes. Then I'm certain that I have something outside of this world serving as my Arthur Conan Doyle. I am as certain of this as I am certain that I am a detective. And I have a name for this thing guiding me from somewhere not of this world. I call it: Beyond."

He was delusional, I thought. He was too smart, and too successful, and got carried away or genuinely sick in the head. Or his natural modesty had been repressed and twisted until he had to believe in this guardian.

Tsukumojuku wasn't done spouting nonsense. "But here I am speaking in the present tense, when really, this is all in the past. Like I said at the start, I no longer have the certainty required to call myself a detective. My Beyond has abandoned me. I'm still me, but my role in this world is no longer guaranteed by Beyond. Beyond has chosen a new protagonist for this world...for this story. You, Jorge Joestar. This is the last thing I'm certain of."

Hunh? What in the...?

"And the only reason I need to be sure it's you is that I'm jealous of you. I would never have imagined that it could be this

terrifying to have the reason for your existence snatched away. I've never had thoughts like these before. It really drives home just how much I took for granted my position, and the peace of mind it brought. Sure, I had my rough patches, and things happened that were sad, or painful. But as long as I fulfilled my role, I was satisfied. And a life filled with satisfaction is something to be grateful for. I know that much, even at eleven. And because I'm eleven, I'm a little jealous that you've stolen my position. I'm just a kid, after all."

I was pretty sure I wasn't to blame for whatever he was accusing me of, but beyond that it made no sense. "So does this mean I have to become Sherlock Holmes, and act like a detective instead of you?" I asked.

He blinked at me. "Ah! Ha! Ha! No, I doubt it. Your story already has monsters and mystic powers in it, so I doubt you'll end up being a detective," he chuckled. "I think you'll play the character of Jorge Joestar in a story called *Jorge Joestar*."

Sure. "Normal, then. I planned on doing that anyway."

Tsukumojuku gave me a very serious look. "That'll never happen. With Beyond at your side, your adventure will be without compare. Let me give you one piece of advice: You should believe. Remember that. Believe in Beyond, and you will overcome your fate."

He made it sound prophetic, but I couldn't take it seriously.

But I did become friends with Tsukumojuku. Pretty much by the end of that day we'd become best friends, like I'd always dreamed of having. We talked about everything. My stories were always pathetic, but the tales Tsukumojuku told of his adventures were highly entertaining. He was Japanese, and his name could be written in kanji. The kanji used were the numbers 9, 10, 9, 10, and 9. Even in Japan, nobody else had a name like that. He'd been born in Fukui Prefecture, in a small town called Nishi Akatsuki. When

he was three, his archaeologist father took him to Africa, and when he was five he came to the Canary Islands with his mother. When he was six he began working as a detective, not just in the Canary Islands, but on the Spanish mainland, too. He'd even been called away to Egypt to solve a mystery. The cases he'd solved were as bizarre as he'd promised, and after solving so many incredibly complicated cases I could see why he'd start to wonder if some kind of god was on his side.

I never did go back to school. Instead, I spent all my time playing with Tsukumojuku. It was almost time for Lisa Lisa to leave, but I was so busy enjoying friendship I'd barely spoken to her in weeks. I'd expected to be sad, but it was starting to look like a tearless farewell. Straits and his mysterious companions came over for dinner, and ate and drank a lot. Mum cried, and Lisa Lisa seemed to be as emotionally uninvested as I was.

She just told everyone, "I will follow my destiny," and didn't really try and talk to me at all.

I wasn't...happy to have to go, but I had a new friend, and Antonio Torres was no longer around to torment me, so I was no longer that worried about the future, and I figured Lisa Lisa was glad she didn't have to protect me all the time now. I didn't tell her that, though.

What I did say was this.

After the big, noisy dinner, after the others had taken their drinks to the cigar room or the terrace, I heard a voice call my name, and turned to see Lisa Lisa standing there, in her green dress.

"Hey," I said, and then didn't know what else to say. I knew there was a lot I should say, but none of it seemed right.

"Since I was a little girl, I've always wondered why I wasn't a Joestar," Lisa Lisa said. "I wished I could have been. Then Mama Erina would be my Mum, and you'd be my little brother, and I'd be your big sister."

"...mm."

"But as I grew older I started to think maybe it was better

this way."

"Why? Would I have made things harder for you if you were my sister?"

She laughed. I hadn't seen her smile in a long time. "Don't be stupid, Jorge. No. What do you think, Jorge? Would you want me to be your sister?"

"Eh? I can't even imagine it. I don't know what to think. You'll always be Lisa Lisa to me."

This was true. The idea has certainly crossed my mind, but I just couldn't imagine a world where she was really related to me. And it had never occurred to me to wonder if it was a good thing that she wasn't.

"Good," Lisa Lisa said, smiling.

"What?"

"Well, if we were brother and sister, then we couldn't get married."

"Hunh?"

"I don't really get love, or any of that stuff yet, but...I am glad that I *could* marry you."

Married? To Lisa Lisa?

"I can't imagine that," I blurted out. That wasn't something to admit to any girl, least of all Lisa Lisa.

"Heh heh, you're so rude!" she said, laughing.

"I love you, Lisa Lisa," I said, quickly.

I had no idea why I said that.

"Me too, Jorge. I love you, too."

What were we talking about?

We went to bed, and when we woke up in the morning and went to see her off she just waved at me, and I can't remember if she said anything else. Mum and I went back to the house alone, and I went out to play with Tsukumojuku.

In the new year, Tsukumojuku and I both turned twelve.

Being with him, we often encountered mysteries, and just in the Canary Islands I got mixed up in no less than three serial killer cases.

"What the heck? I can still do this detective thing just fine," Tsukumojuku said, scratching his head. But he was really, really smart, and I couldn't even manage to be as useful as Watson.

When we were thirteen, we solved fifteen locked room mysteries, and when we were fourteen, we captured two serial killers, and when we were fifteen, we discovered the fifteen locked room mysteries from two years before were actually the work of a single criminal and captured the real killer. By 'we' I mean mostly Tsukumojuku.

I thought we would spend high school in the same way, but shortly after capturing the killer behind the fifteen locked room mysteries Tsukumojuku had to go back to Japan, and I cried a lot. I really didn't know how I could go on alone.

"Ha ha ha, that's where Beyond comes in," he said, standing on the docks. I hadn't heard that word in a while."

"This isn't funny," I said, but I knew he never joked.

"I'm serious. Do you remember what I said the first time we talked? The thing I told you to remember?"

Believe in Beyond, and you will overcome your fate.

I did. But I wanted to focus on how unhappy I was to be saying good bye to my first and only friend, and didn't want to talk about that crap at all. There was no point in talking crap about how I was the protagonist of my own life here. I just really didn't want to say goodbye to this handsome detective, who'd solved so many mysteries with me at his side.

"I'll come to Japan someday. I'll come find you, even on the other side of the world. And we'll solve more cases together!" Or he'd solve them, at any rate.

"I kinda get the feeling that won't happen," Tsukumojuku said, laughing. I couldn't believe it. He had no tact at all.

"No, I'm coming!" I insisted.

"If Beyond wills it," he said, gave me a Japanese dictionary, got on a ship, and sailed away.

Three days later the boat carrying Tsukumojuku vanished off the coast of Florida. Five days later news of this reached the Canary Islands. I prayed every night for two months, but when the army found the boat at the bottom of the sea I had to settle for feeling deeply betrayed.

I cursed God, and cried. I don't know what plan you had, but the price for stealing my friend was very, very high. He was my first and only friend. He was amazing. He should have been the main character!

Chapter 2
Nishi Akatsuki
西暁

My name is Jorge Joestar. I'm fifteen years old, and live in Fukui Prefecture, Japan. I'm English...but I look and probably am Japanese. For reasons I've never known, my Japanese birth parents were unable to look after me, or never intended to do so; without even giving me a name I was handed over to the authorities, and adopted by the Joestar family. So I was given a name that could be either English or Japanese. According to Japanese law, when I turn eighteen I'll have to pick either Japanese citizenship or English; at the same time, I have to select a formal name. Currently my official name is spelled out in katakana, with no kanji or Roman letter spelling set. The Roman letters in my passport read JOJI JOESTAR, which is super lame. If I go with Japanese citizenship, on my eighteenth birthday I'll have to pick kanji for the name, and currently I'm leaning towards the kanji for 'transferred' and 'child' (譲児) in keeping with the Japanese idea that one's name should describe you. But since I was raised English, trying to act like I'm Japanese now feels like I'm pretending; I'm used to the katakana, and don't really care what my Japanese name is. As far as the English name, despite the strong objections of my family, I'm dead set on Jorge, so I write it like that any time I get the chance. I'm not the least bit Latin, but my friends all call me Jojo, and I get called Detective Jojo a lot. But if I went with George Joestar the nickname Jojo would be impossible. If nothing else, Joji wouldn't cause any problems with the nickname, but if I let any native English speakers read it, they'd never pronounce it right. Joji is a reading by and for Japanese speakers. If details don't add up right I get agitated, and start searching for a better way. This trait has led to my room being very clean, and made me a great detective.

And that very trait is getting up my nose right now.

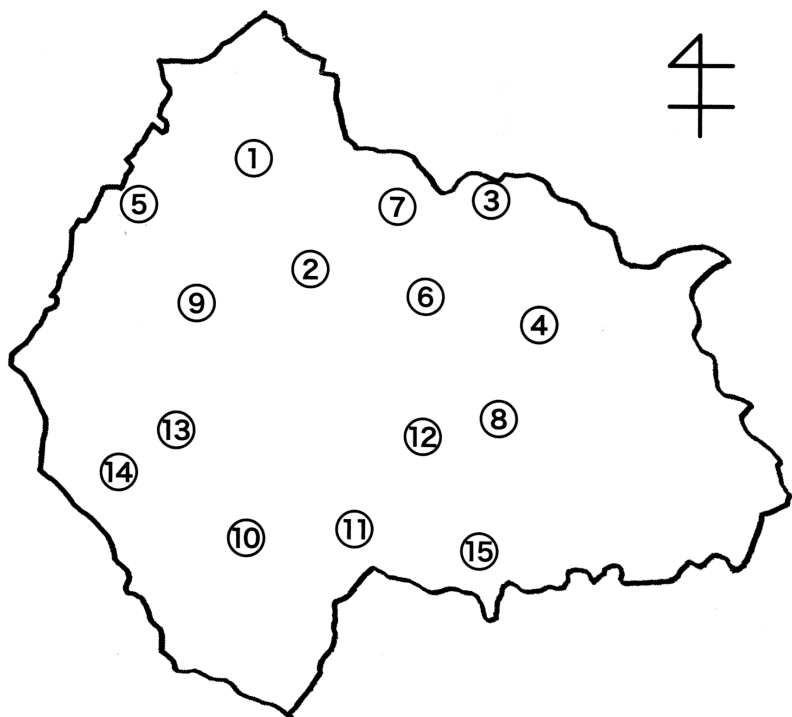
Something had been bothering me for a while, and was coming to a head.

This particular itch had been nagging me for the last couple

of years, ever since I solved fifteen locked room mysteries in a row, but two serial killer investigations had distracted me for basically this entire year. But now that I'd successfully caught the triplet dismemberment psycho, Guruguru Majin, and had received word that they'd finally tracked down the serial torturer Nail Peeler after his daring escape six months back I was finally able to relax. I made a full report of my escapades to my father, who – a victim of a particularly misguided attempt at selecting a Japanese sounding name – was named Jonda Joestar. Then I went to bed, and finally remembered the source of my discontent.

Specifically, a newspaper article that laid out the locations of the fifteen locked room mysteries on a map of Fukui Prefecture. All the cases had happened in the Northern half of Fukui, in the area called Reihoku. The newspaper article numbered them in the order they'd been committed; in other words, the order the victims died. This made sense from a news perspective, but my immediate thought was that it was totally the wrong approach to these particular cases. The trick to locked room mysteries lies in their discovery. The realization that the room has been locked from the inside is what defines them. The killer's job ends with the discovery.

I made a mental map of them numbered in order of discovery.



Something about this map had been tickling the corner of my mind for a while now. My instincts told me this order had meaning.

My first thought was that the locations were drifting slowly south. Each of the fifteen cases had a killer, and we'd found no links between the killers, the victims, or any other aspects of the cases. But the cases did occur more or less from north to south, moving like a cold front across the map. Fukui's Reihoku area

wasn't terribly large; fifteen locked room mysteries happening in rapid succession was enough to make you wonder if the urge to commit a locked room murder was somehow communicable. An outbreak of the locked room murder syndrome. I had a vague memory of some expert suggesting as much on the news.

Maybe it worked like dismemberment; it was a known fact that once the idea entered the public consciousness that cutting up your victim made it easier to carry, to hide the body, and to throw investigators off the track, we saw a sharp rise in the number of mutilated corpses. But if that was the case, the influence would have spread to the whole country, and the trend would not have died out after only fifteen cases. But it had. As far I knew, in the year since the fifteenth cases, there had been no locked room mysteries at all. This fifteen were an isolated group. They looked like they had no connections...or someone was making them look that way.

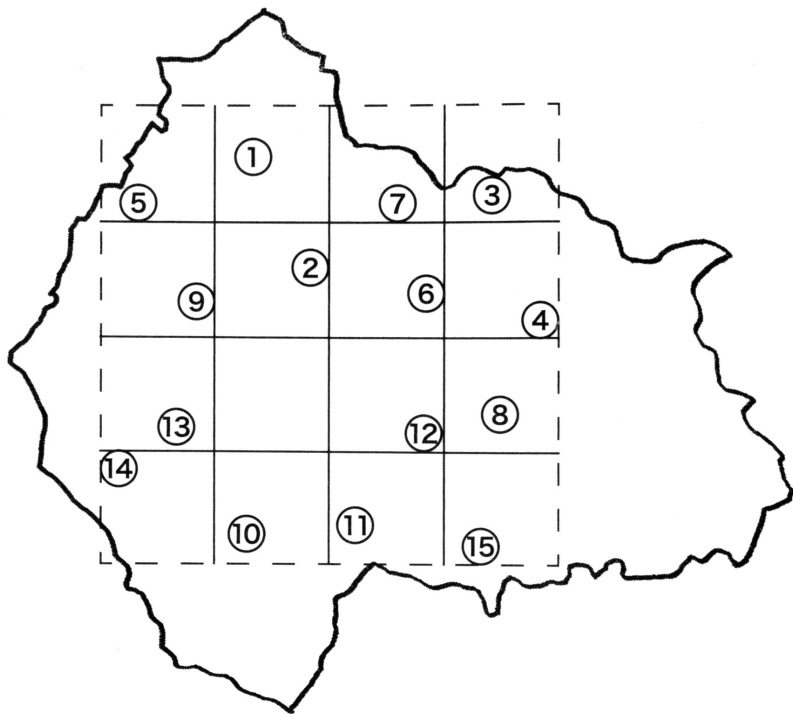
I opened the mental map again, and stared at it. Was there a pattern that lay beneath the seemingly random spread? Some principle at work? Something beyond the general spread to the south, a boundary, or...border?

These were locked room murders; they took place in enclosed areas. If there was some sort of border around each of them? Why had the word border caught my attention? Maps have an outline around them, marking the borders of the location or place depicted.

I felt sure the scenes of each crime weren't scattered at random, but carefully placed at appropriate distances, placed as far away from each other as the border allowed. But I couldn't quite see where the boundaries were. Why not?

There had been no cases discovered in the city of Takefu, leaving a big white space, and that felt like it was getting in the way of me seeing the pattern. If a sixteenth case had happened there,

then the map would make a lot more sense, I thought...and suddenly I saw it. That gap had its own borders, dividing up the map neatly. A large 4x4 grid laid over the map; it had been right under my nose all along, but the blank space had blinded me to it.

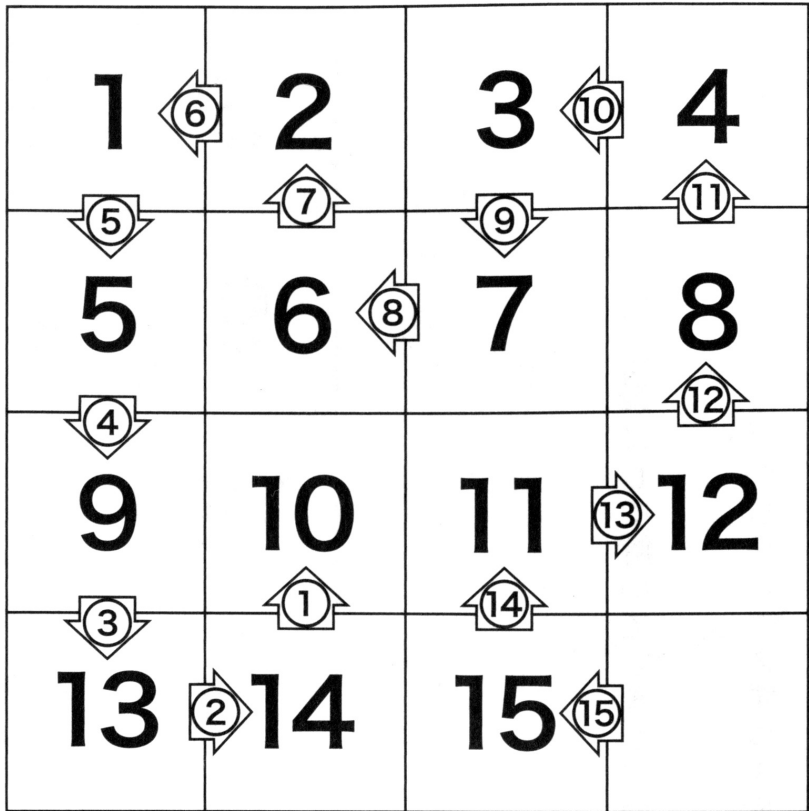


Looked at this way, I instantly knew that blank space, the empty square, was the key to everything. This was a giant 15-puzzle.

5	1	7	3
9	2	6	4
13		12	8
14	10	11	15

I solved the puzzle an instant later. It was easy. I only had to move each piece a single square.

Each number was only one square away from sequential order. Since they'd moved in different directions, it appeared random; but order lurked right next door.



Having solved this two year old puzzle, I wondered what it meant.

A 15-puzzle.

If there was a puzzle, then someone must have designed it. And if it was hidden, that meant it was a message to whoever discovered it. Was someone trying to tell me something?

When this flood of locked room murders had happened two years ago, the police and I had, of course, searched thoroughly for any connection between them, and verified countless times

that there was no such thing. Was there really someone directing all the individual killers? The tricks they'd used were all different. No connections, no pattern, and we'd been unable to figure out exactly where the killers all got the idea to use a locked room trick. They all insisted it had just seemed like a good idea, and we had no choice but to take them at their word. I knew perfectly well that human imagination did not always have a clear foundation, and certain criminal actions could trend without any contact between the perpetrators.

But the police and I didn't take the killers at their word, and had searched high and low for any indication that someone had helped them. How had we missed it? Had there really been someone who tracked down would be murderers and supplied them with plans for a locked room trick?

There was. There had to be. This 15-puzzle proved it.

But we'd caught all the killers. I'd explained the case, and they'd confessed, explaining their motives and essentially turning themselves in. They'd been very cooperative with the police and prosecutors afterwards...was this all a performance to protect the designer? What kind of person could inspire such loyalty in all fifteen killers?

This was no good. I couldn't start doubting the designer's existence now. Throughout the case we'd been constantly of the opinion that there *should* be one, but the evidence said otherwise. That made it hard to believe, even now I knew the truth. I had to stop. If this puzzle existed, then someone had to have made it.

I had to focus on deciphering the message contained within the puzzle. I looked over my mental map of the puzzle again. A simple 15-puzzle, each number moved a single square away from the starting position. Starting from the blank space, all you had to do was move the number that belonged there into the gap and the puzzle solved itself... I checked the order of moves again.

Blank ← 10 ← 14 ← 13 ← 9 ← 5 ← 1 ← 2 ← 6 ← 7 ← 3 ← 4
← 8 ← 12 ← 11 ← 15.

Was this...supposed to indicate a Domino Murder Exchange sequence?

If the victim from the tenth case was killed by the killer of the fourteenth case, and the victim in fourteen was killed by the thirteen killer...if the killers had traded places, allowing those with actual motives for the killing to establish alibis at the time of death and evade suspicion, would that make sense?

But in that case there was no indication who could have killed the victim in the fifteenth case. If the Domino Murder Exchange were to complete, the murdered in case ten would have to kill the victim in case fifteen, but that wasn't shown anywhere in the puzzle.

If I was to correctly read the implications of this puzzle in terms of a Domino Murder Exchange, the tenth case's killer would have killed the victim in the blank space, an as yet undiscovered sixteenth locked room, and the killer in the fifteenth case would have committed the murders in both the eleventh and the fifteenth cases. The true killer in the sixteenth case would have kept his hands clean...so did that mean he was the one behind the whole shebang?

No, no, no. I was trying too hard to find answers in this puzzle. The whole point of exchanging murders was to get yourself a cast iron alibi and keep yourself off the list of suspects. But in all fifteen cases, the killers had been arrested, confessed, sent to the courts, and were starting to stand trial. With the possible exception of the killer in some hypothetical extra case that might occupy the blank spot, nobody got away with anything. If they had been so desperate to avoid suspicion that they'd do something as

risky as trade murders, hadn't they been caught a little too easily?

No, no, no, no, no, no. These fifteen murders may have taken place in the relatively short time period of a year, but it wasn't like they happened all at the same time; they were spread evenly out across the full twelve months. So the first locked room mystery had already been solved by the time the third was discovered, the killer identified. The cases were being steadily solved as the new locked rooms were found. It was absolutely impossible for the ninth killer to have actually committed the thirteenth murder, as the puzzle implied; by the time that case happened, I had already identified the killer in the ninth case, the police had taken him into custody, and he was safely behind bars. For the same reasons, the killer from the fifth case could never have murdered the ninth victim, and the killer in the first case could not have committed the fifth crime.

This could only fit the model of a Domino Murder Exchange if I had been wrong about all the killers I'd caught, if all those on trial were taking the fall for the real culprit...but that was impossible. Why? Because I was a detective, and if I felt I was right about something, I was never wrong. These killers were the killers. The Domino Murder Exchange theory itself was wrong.

If I had the right killers, than those cases were closed. Solved.

Then if I focused less on the numbers themselves, and more on the nature of the 15-puzzle, was the intent to suggest that the locked room murders had each occurred somewhere other than they would normally have happened? The tenth case would have happened in the blank space, the fourteen would have happened where the tenth was discovered, with each successive murder committed in the wrong location? Did that work?

56 Not in the least, I decided quickly. There was nothing unnatural about the locations of the murders. Of the fifteen cases,

two had occurred in tourist attractions, but the others had all occurred in homes belonging to the killers, the victims, or friends thereof. Each trick had been tied specifically to the layout of the room in questions, and no particular contortions had been required to make the tricks work. The trick used to lock the room in case fourteen would never have worked at the location used in case ten. It was impossible to divorce the tricks from the rooms they locked. A locked room trick can only be manufactured from the geography of the room. The placement of furniture, accents, of cracks string or wire could be run through, of hiding places – these specifics were different at each location. What the killer could physically do was different in each case, as different as the people involved. It went without saying that finding tricks that could be used at fifteen locations was highly improbable.

No, it was impossible. Four of the fifteen cases had taken place in four of the strangest buildings in Fukui, and used the bizarre nature of those buildings as an essential component of the trick. No trick that involved moving walls and floors, or ceilings that turned upside-down could possibly be used anywhere else.

The locked room murders had been used in the right place, by the right people. I had solved each of them correctly. Those cases were over. So what was this puzzle? If I assumed that I had solved everything correctly, then the meaning of this could not be that the real solution would only be seen if I shifted everything. There must be something else, something new.

The fifteen locked room mysteries were of no importance, and I had to examine the meaning of this puzzle from the surface. The simplest reading was the correct one – namely, that because each number had been shifted, a new, extra space had been left behind.

The man behind the fifteen locked rooms had created a new mystery, one that had only just begun.

Then what I had to do was try to find this new, extra space. I got out of bed, dressed, got on my bike and rode north towards Takefu. What was I looking for? Something sort of locked room, I supposed. But the borders I'd found each covered an area ten kilometers square. Trying to find something locked room-esque by aimlessly pedaling around country roads in the middle of the night seemed hardly productive...but as I came down route 365, entering the outskirts of Takefu, I found a house on fire.

It was so sudden I almost didn't recognize it as a fire. But I took a bizarre comfort in the knowledge that this was what I was supposed to find, that it had been prepared for me. I barely even had to look.

The farmhouse on fire belonged to the Kato family of Nishi Akatsuki. Kato Serika's parents had died recently, and she'd been in town to deal with their empty house.

As I furiously pedaled closer, I found her standing outside with her husband Satoshi and their four-year-old son Seshiru, staring blankly at the fire.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

When Serika and Satoshi failed to respond, Seshiru piped up. "There's a pool in the house and a stranger swimming in it!"

? What the heck did that mean? I looked in the window of the burning house, and Seshiru was right; the house was filled with water, and there were jets of it spitting out of every crack. The water was moving through the house at whirlpool speeds, and the front door seemed to have been shut by Satoshi to protect his family from the current and the furniture hurtling along in it. As I gaped, I caught a glimpse of a human figure rocketing past a second story window. But it didn't look like he was swimming to me.

Was he dead?

Was this another locked room mystery?

I tried asking the Katos again. "How did this happen?"

"I dunno," Serika said. "We...were eatin' dinner, when suddenly water started pourin' down the stairs. We rushed outta the house and...it just started burnin'."

"It came from upstairs?" Water? "Did you have a tank up there?" I looked up at the house, but it was a normal looking building, no sign of any water tower.

"No, no," Satoshi said. "That's no ordinary water, neither. That's sea water."

"? Sea water?"

"From the sea. It was salty, like."

"Yeah, that's salt water, alright. It reeked of it," Serika said. Seshiru laughed, and nodded.

It certainly did smell like the sea. But we were a good forty kilometers from the ocean, and there were several mountain ranges in the way. How in the hell had so much salt water suddenly appeared on the second floor?

At any rate, there was definitely somebody inside, so this would soon be a crime scene. I'd like to preserve it as much as possible, but that was hard to do with it being on fire and all. I looked up at the second story window again, and saw a young man clinging to it, looking down at us. His hair was in his eyes, thrashing in the current, but for a moment, our eyes met.

I'd just assumed he was already dead. Guess not.

"Okay, you guys better move farther back," I shouted, and ran to the nearest window. Between the weight of the water and the fire the walls were ready to burst...the indoor pool was no long for this world. Did I have time? I broke the glass on the nearest ground floor window. There was a crack, and water burst out, sending shards of glass and bits of broken window frame rocketing past me. Zsshhaaaaaash! I barely dodged out of the way in time, and quickly broke another window. The spray on my face

confirmed that house was filled with salt water. But this wasn't the time to ponder that mystery. I reached the front door, put my hand on the knob, but before I could open it the hinges gave up, and a wave of water burst out, sweeping me and the door away.

There was a roar as the water filled the front lawn, and when it subsided I found the second story man lying on the ground in front of me, coughing up water.

"Perdón," he said. "¿Qué pasó? ¿Dónde estoy?"

Spanish. He might be wet, but this guy looked Japanese. He was very handsome, but looked about the same age as me.

"This is Japan? I have no idea what's going on, though," I said.

"Oh! Japanese!" he said, in Japanese.

Behind him there was a deafening rumble, and the Kato residence collapsed into a pile of wet bricks. At least the fire was out!

There was another rumble – thunder. I looked up, and the clouds covering the sky were swirling. I saw something shaped like a funnel retreating back into the sky. It was dark, and hard to make out, but...had that been a tornado?

But tornadoes generally dragged things off the ground, not dropped them off. And for it to do a pin-point touchdown on the Kato residence on tonight of all nights, at this exact time, with no other damage...

I had no choice but to accept it. That tornado had brought this boy here. From somewhere that spoke Spanish.

"You okay?" I asked.

He brushed his wet hair out of his eyes with both hands, and blinked up at me. "That's a tough question. I'm not injured, at any rate. What day is it?"

"July 23rd."

"Okay, same day...but I was on a boat, and we'd just sighted

the coast of Florida."

?

"Florida?"

"Between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico."

".....? What's the Atlantic? Never heard of this gulf, either."

"Hunh? The Atlantic...it's an ocean."

"...sorry, but there's no such thing."

".....? What do you mean?"

"There's only one ocean. The Ocean."

".....no, that's.....um? This is...where, in Japan?"

"Fukui Prefecture. Nishi Akatsuki."

"Hunh? Then I'm home? How...?"

"? What, you're from Nishi Akatsuki? So I am! How old are you? I'm fifteen, sixteen this year."

"Same age. My name is Kato Tsukumojuku. My address here is Nishi Akatsuki-cho Nishi Akatsuki 3-21."

Weird name, but I gulped for a totally different reason. I turned to the Kato family by the gate. "He's related to you?"

The address he'd just given was the empty home where Serika's parents had lived. But the Katos didn't answer. They just stared in horror at the remains of the house they'd just built a few years earlier.

I looked back at Tsukumojuku. "Your name written 9, 10, 9, 10, 9, then?"

"Ah, Fukui dialect...yes, it is."

"So you made quite the bizarre entrance. What do you remember?"

"Well...I was on a boat, crossing the Atlantic from the Canary Islands to the America."

"The Canary Islands?"

"Never heard of them? Small islands, owned by Spain, off the west coast of Africa."

"Okay...and the Atlantic?"

"...the Atlantic ocean lies between the North and South American continent on the one side, and the Europe and African continents on the other. Doesn't it?"

"No. Also, what are you talking about, American and African continents?"

".....what continents do you have?"

"Panlandia."

".....this doesn't sound like an issue of education," he said.

I nodded. "I'm very well educated," I said. He gave me a dubious look, so I added, "I'm a detective, after all."

His eyes opened wide, then he grinned. "Oh. So am I."

"Oh yeah? You're shittin' me? The great detective Kato Tsukumojuku? Never heard of you, and it sounds like that ain't cause you operated abroad."

"Right."

"Better introduce myself, then. My name is Jorge Joestar. Everyone calls me Jojo. Detective Jojo. Welcome to the new world, where the Atlantic and the Canary Islands don't exist."

Tsukumojuku just gaped at me for a while.

"...what is Beyond playing at?" he asked, at last. "What role does it have in mind for me?"

This made no sense, but it seemed like he was talking to himself, so I let it pass. No idea where he came from, but it was a place with weird ass tornadoes. Didn't seem like somewhere you could just up and go as you pleased. What he'd just said was probably some sort of religious grumbling, nothing I could do about it.

The way he'd appeared was so bizarre I wasn't really all that surprised by anything any more, but by the time he was through

getting checked out at the hospital Tsukumojuku had gone straight through surprise to clutching his head.

Firstly, while it was indeed July 23rd, it was 2012, not 1904. He'd traveled forwards in time over a hundred years.

We quickly proceeded to comparing world maps...of course, there were no world maps that looked the way Tsukumojuku described his world, so he had to draw his freehand.

He produced a very detailed sketch of a very strange world. His world looked broken.

I showed him ours, and he said, "This...is impossible."

My sentiments exactly.

When Tsukumojuku said nothing more, I said, "There's no way the land shifted this much in a hundred years."

Continental drift was a matter of a few millimeters a year, and that was on the active side. It would take hundreds of millions of years for Tsukumojuku's world to become mine. The continents moved on the plates, forming a giant continent, breaking up, and moving together again. Plate tectonics showed this had happened and would happen again. Even if his continents had just merged together once to form my world, that would have taken forever.

But I didn't see this change happening so easily. The pieces were all mixed up. To get this far, they'd have to trial and error it for billions of years – longer than the life of the Earth. It had been roughly a hundred million years since the first humans showed up, so if Tsukumojuku came from the same planet as me, he would have had to have been through several continental divides, but if he came from a billion years ago his clothes, manners, and Japanese were much too similar to our own. I couldn't see more than a hundred years difference between us.

I was pretty sure the only possible explanation would involve parallel world theory. That sounded fun! This proved parallel worlds not only existed, but that it was possible to travel

between them! Wah ha ha!

While I worked myself into a tizzy, Tsukumojuku sat on the hospital bed, comparing the two maps closely, muttering surprise at the location of one place or another, confused about the location of others.

"I say," he said at least, "I don't see England anywhere."

"English is a phantom country, not on any map," I said – the stock, self-deprecating description all English citizens used.

A group of Anglo-Saxons living in Maine in the 19th century had declared independence, calling themselves the Kingdom of England. They even fought a war. The American government never officially recognized them, but several other countries did...only for them to collapse from within, and be swiftly swallowed back up into the United States. Having lost their country, the English scattered across the world. There were many families like the Joestars, that would have died out if they hadn't adopted.

"Oh," Tsukumojuku said, gravely. "Well, at any rate, I have a theory as to how I came to this world."

Ehhhhhhhhhh!?! Already!?

"You're some detective!" I said. I was used to hearing this, but I'd never said it myself before. I was a little miffed, honestly, but I didn't have enough data to form a theory of my own yet.

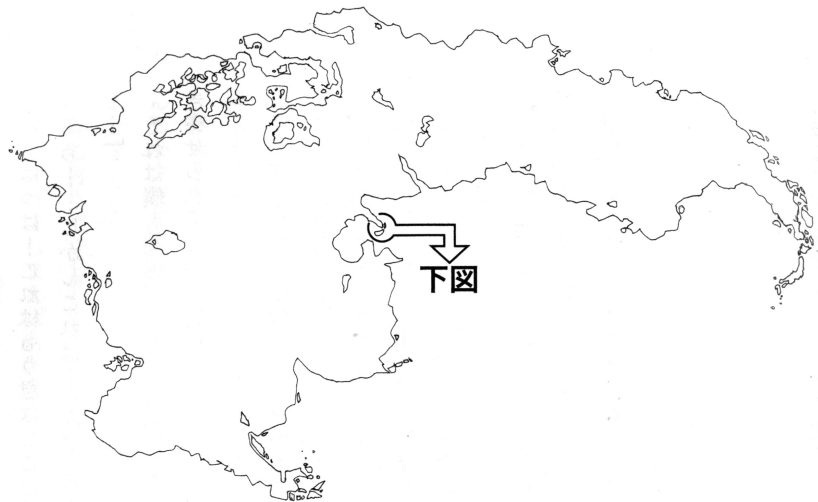
"It's just a theory. I've no proof of any kind," he said, and pointed down at the map he'd drawn. "I was headed here, towards the Southern tip of Florida. If you connect Florida, this island, Puerto Rico, and then these islands, the Bermudas, you get a triangle shaped area of ocean. Legend has it that many ships vanish entirely as they pass through this area – sometimes just the passengers vanish, and the ships around found empty. We call it the Bermuda Triangle. Like I said, just before I passed out I was gazing at the coast of Florida on deck, then went down to my cabin to stow my luggage. The boat was headed due north, right through

this point on the triangle. Now, this area of Florida is located at 25 degrees north, 81 degrees west...which is exactly where Japan is in this world."

Ooh, I thought, and took a closer look at the maps myself. Even on the hand-drawn map it was clear the two points overlapped. Then I noticed something, and said, excitedly, "And if that theory is true, then we've basically figured out how to get you back."

Since Tsukumojuku still didn't quite know his way around the world, I pointed.

"See, there's a bug gulf in the center of Panlandia, with a peninsula and a bunch of islands. That's Florida, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda all right on top of each other, right? The Bermuda Triangle's basically the Bermuda dot. And according to your map, this is right on top of your world's Nishi Akatsuki."



"Really?"

"Ha ha ha! This is straight up telling you where to go to get back home, isn't it!?"

"Yeah...but...it's kind of scary, isn't it? Like someone made this happen. Like they summoned me..."

I agreed. "Like' nothing, someone clearly did."

".....!"

"Sure, that's scary, but I got your back on this. I'm hella interested in what's happening to you."

"But I'm not the target here," Tsukumujuku said, pointedly. "You are."

Eh? "Wha? I'm more like an innocent bystander that just got mixed up in this mess."

"But you aren't. Why were you there tonight? How did you find me?"

Good point. I explained how I'd solved fifteen locked room murders two years ago, then found a 15-puzzle that had eluded me at the time, solved it, and took off down route 365 to verify the answer. I had to admit, he might be right. I was lead right to him.

"...guess neither of us were there coincidentally."

"Not only that. You said you solved fifteen locked room murders two years ago. In my own world, I did exactly the same thing."

"Hunh?" Did how?

"In the Canary Islands, on the island of La Palma. I'm sure the details of the cases are different, but..."

The two of us compared notes on the salient points of each set of fifteen. They were completely different, of course. **It was impossible to divorce the tricks from the rooms they locked. A locked room trick can only be manufactured from the geography of the room.** The same tricks could not be used in a different country and time. But the order of discovery in Tsukumojuuku's

cases was identical; and the 15-puzzle they formed matched as well.

"I never noticed," Tskumujuku said, gloomily.

"I just noticed myself like an hour ago. Betcha woulda figured her out soon enough."

He looked up at me. "You ever worked a case with another detective?"

"Nope. Only like 800,000 people even live in Fukui. Lotta cases for the country and I ain't the only detective around, but I never bumped into any of the others on a case. If we hear someone else is on the job the others all stay away, I suppose. I have heard it happens to Tokyo or Osaka detectives all the time, though."

"I've never even met another detective. The Canary Islands were not much more populated. So let me ask you this; if several detectives are on the case, and one solves the case before the other does, is the slower one still a detective?"

Ugh. Who gave a crap? Just 'cause I solved the 15-puzzle first didn't mean he had to sulk about it. His case was a hundred years ago – maybe – so we weren't exactly racing, here.

"Depends on the next case," I said, at last. "If the slower detective gets there first the next time they team up, they're even." Honestly, I was just trying to make him feel better.

He wasn't buying it at all. "Detective isn't a title earned over a lifetime. You don't look back over your deeds and realize you're a detective. You know you are, and introduce yourself as such."

"True enough."

"If you can't solve a case, you aren't a detective."

"Hmm...certainly, in that moment, other people might say you weren't qualified."

"Detective, in the sense we use it, is an honorary term. The

moment people deny it, you lose the right to it."

"And you can get it back on the next case."

"You're thinking in lifetime terms, again. You can't be a detective your whole life. You're one on each individual case."

"....." Fuck this. "Okay, okay, so you feel like you aren't a detective any more? Do better next time."

"I haven't believed I was a detective for some time. Even on the Canary Islands, I wasn't sure why – why I could continue to act like a detective in spite of it. It never felt real."

"? I don't know what you're driving at, but if you solved cases, you're a detective. I might have got to the 15-puzzle before you, but you solved all fifteen cases, right? You did your job."

"If someone got to the truth before you, would you still call yourself a detective?"

"...I might keep a lid on it till the next time, yeah."

"There will be no next time," Tsukumojuku said. "I'll never call myself a detective again. Not now I've met you."

"?"

"You are the Jorge Joestar who will steal my title."

"What the fuck are you talking about!?"

I finally slipped and swore in front of him, but he didn't seem to mind. He even laughed.

"Been a long time since a Jorge Joestar spoke like that to me."

What? "Are you memories getting confused, or...?"

"My memories and mind are clear, Jorge Joestar. I can safely say my mind and headspace have never been so free of clutter. My role as detective may have ended, but I believe I have been given a new one. I am here to explain Beyond to you."

What is Beyond playing at? He'd whispered. I instantly knew I didn't want to hear any of this, but that I needed to hear it all the same.

"In my world," Tsukumojuku said, "There is another Jorge Joestar."

What? ♡ Really!? ♡♡♡ This was getting fun! ♡♡♡♡♡

He told me about this other Jorge Joestar. The story of a bullied kid who made friends with a detective, and had adventures on a South Seas Island that didn't exist in our world. The fifteen locked room murders weren't the only similar cases. The three serial killer cases I'd closed the year before that, had also been solved three years ago by Tsukumojuku and his partner, 'Jorge Joestar'. Likewise, they'd caught psychos remarkably similar to the Guruguru Majin and the Nail Peeler 'last year'.

Was this synchronicity? Or was history repeating itself?

Before I could think further, Tsukumojuku said, "And this year, Jorge and I captured the true mastermind behind the fifteen locked room murders. The man who invented all the locked room tricks, and controlled the killers from the shadows."

Haaaaaaaa? Waitwaitwaitwait "Stop!" I yelled. "I haven't done that bit yet let me think!"

Tsukumojuku recoiled from my sudden ferocity. "It's not that complicated," he said.

"You wanna steal the detective role back from me?"

"I don't mean to do that, and I doubt that would happen..."

I ignored him and began thinking furiously.

So there was a mastermind? Obviously that made sense, of course there was. Fifteen locked room murders had happened all in a row, all in Fukui, all in Reihoku. But like I said before, the police and I had suspected there was a mastermind/controller in the shadows, and left no stone unturned in our search for one. Had we

missed something? I didn't think so. I was sure we'd been thorough. And correct. There were no connections of any kind between anyone related to any of the fifteen cases. The police and forensics people had been over every detail; we'd even tried hypnosis and every occult technique we could think of to no avail. We even tried voodoo dolls.

I had not been wrong.

Those fifteen locked room murders had ended with the summoning of this other detective from a bizarre alternate universe. I had been so sure the fifteen cases had each been independent, even though they'd lead me – coincidentally or otherwise – to what seemed awfully like a magical phenomenon.

But perhaps that notion was my mistake. I definitely hadn't overlooked anything; I'd checked every detail. Even now, I felt comfortable removing that option from the table.

So if I hadn't overlooked anything, then, logically, there must be something I hadn't looked at yet.

The man who invented all the locked room tricks, and controlled the killers from the shadows. If someone like this was behind the cases in my world too, then this shadow controller's shadow must have touched each of the fifteen killers. But that was impossible. One of the cases had happened inside a prison, and the killer was serving a life sentence, with limited visitation rights. And we'd checked every visitor thoroughly. Another locked room case involved a shut-in son who killed his father; the son hadn't spoken to anyone outside his direct family, and we'd found no records of any suspicious contact online, either.

This shadow controller could not physically exist.

In other words, he had to exist in some non-physical form.

This wasn't that surprising an idea. We'd already entertained a number of occult theories, and tested them thoroughly. We'd done occult. So what else was there?

Where did they meet?

Where could they meet without meeting?

"Dreams," I said. "Or daydreams." I wasn't talking to Tsukumojuku. I was just thinking out loud. I kept going. "Not daydreams...that's just thinking, no way for someone else to control you. Unless you had a delusion that you were being controlled? But that would still mean they created the locked room trick themselves. So it must be dreams." Were dreams 100% produced by your own mind?

At this point I noticed Tsukumojuku watching me. Half surprised, half impressed. From this I knew I must be right, but really? Dreams?

It was my idea, though. Dreams, then. Could this shadow controller have manipulated the killers in their dreams?

"The killers in my world all met a clown in their dreams called the Locked Room Maestro," Tsukumojuku said. "He forced the plans for the murders on them. Since everyone forgets their dreams, they all thought they came up with the tricks themselves."

Had he watched Inception or something? But that was sci-fi, and a movie, and you couldn't actually jump into someone else's dream. I must have looked skeptical, but Tsukumojuku carried on expositing.

"This so-called Locked Room Maestro wore clown clothes and makeup, and appeared in the dreams of the killers, working his way into their hearts, and drawing forth the darkest emotions within. That part wasn't too hard. All he had to do was find someone they hated, or had trouble getting along with, or just had trouble communicating with, even just simple disgruntlement. Once he found those emotions, the Locked Room Maestro would appear in their dreams, and blame all those problems on this one person. Nobody can escape their nightmares. The Locked Room Maestro would twist their fear, making it seem like their eventual

victim was the source of it all. No matter how forced the reason, logic and sequential progression have no place in dreams; only the emotional response matters. Once the seed was sown, the killers' fixations would give them even worse dreams. The Maestro would keep a firm grip on the reins, whispering that it was all their victim's fault, and his targets had no choice but to believe him. This vicious cycle continued until they were entirely under his control. The Maestro persisted, driving them deeper, even torturing them if he had to. The killers would find themselves murdered in their dreams, but their eventual victims, or by the Maestro himself. These dreams were so terrifying they'd awaken in a nervous frenzy, and this persisted until the real world felt like a dream to them. Physically, there's nothing wrong with them, but that just makes it worse. They're spending all their times in a state of panic, and don't remember the dreams that caused it, so the frustration is building up inside them with no way to escape, and no clear cause. Eventually someone they would never have dreamed of killing begins to seem like someone they have to murder, and they act. But the Locked Room Maestro never once met them in person; he kept his distance, remained hidden in their dreams. The only reason we ever found the evil clown is because the girl he tried targeting next had a pathological fear of clowns. The Maestro's guise was so terrifying she remembered the dream clearly, spoke to those around her about the horrible clown that kept coming into her dreams and whispering about locked room murders, and this, in turn, attracted our attention. Nobody she'd spoken to believed a word she'd said, but we did. We spoke with the fifteen killers, and they all began to remember him. From what they remembered, we were able to piece together his identity. Aside from the red nose and poofy wig, he was just wearing make up. From their descriptions, we were able to put together a composite sketch. He'd also talked about himself quite a bit in their dreams;

he was so sure they wouldn't remember anything, he let slip a number of details that helped us identify him. I suppose after fifteen successful remote control murders, overconfidence is unsurprising. He was young, too. Still in high school, wanted to be a mystery novelist when he grew up. But he had the power to slip into other people's dreams. When we burst into his house, police in tow, we found the clown outfit and makeup; we assume he purchased them to make that part feel real. We found notebooks filled with locked room tricks. But no novels. It seems he didn't have what it took to be a writer."

"Hell, you can catch the guy, but you can't try him," I said. "No way you can prove the ability to enter dreams, and even if he demonstrates it, nobody would remember."

"...there was no trial. The Spanish police on La Palma beat him to death with their nightsticks, and sank his body in the sea at night. Jorge and I were powerless to stop them, and his mother didn't even try. If word got around that her son was a witch, and the church got involved, her whole family would be persecuted."

Yikes. Country life a hundred years ago sounded harsh.

"If you don't mind me veering off subject," Tsukumojuku started. I stopped him.

"Hang on, sorry, let me check up on this, see if there are any connections between the dreams of my side's killers."

I pulled out my phone, called Shirai Masami at the Fukui PD, and asked him to interrogate the killers about the dreams, using hypnosis if necessary. "Dreams? There you go again with the weird ideas, Jorge," he said, but I knew he'd get it done.

I hung up. "That's a modern phone?" Tsukumojuku said. "It's so small, and there's no line, and there are little pictures moving behind that glass panel."

Surprising, certainly, but everything he was experiencing was. We had no time to stop and discuss the culture clash.

"Look, if we start down that road, it'll never end. America's about to put a man on Mars."

"...yeah, leave it for another day," Tsukumojuku said. "Back to the point...or rather, the tangent."

I wasn't sure what the main point was any more, but I let him run with it.

"Truth is, I don't think Javier Cortez – the true killer – was born with the power to enter dreams. The cause of his problems lay with his mother, Leonora Cortez. Just before the cops made him disappear, Javier confessed everything to Jorge. He asked Jorge, 'Do you know why I always did locked rooms?' Jorge shook his head. 'Because all deaths take place in locked rooms. I've slipped through the dreams of any number of people, and convinced them to kill someone in a locked room, but the one I really wanted to die, the one I really wanted to kill...was myself. When I slept, I was trapped in a locked room with my mother.' When Jorge repeated these words to me, I finally started asking the question I should have been asking...now that I had the answer. In other words, why was it Javier spent so much time dreaming. It takes a lot of time to drive someone so far into a corner that they'll commit a locked room murder. Javier wasn't working on the fifteen killers one at a time. I don't think he did them all at once, but he was always working on several simultaneously. And those are just the people he succeeded with; there must have been other targets that proved less susceptible. He traveled through all their dreams, even showing up in their daytime naps if they got too scared to sleep at night. Which means Javier was sleeping all day, too. That's an unhealthy amount of sleep. Why did Javier spend so much time sleeping? **'When I slept, I was trapped in a locked room with my mother.'** Locked in a room with Leonora, he slept, escaping into other people's dreams, hoping to find someone who would kill him. What caused such anger, and self-loathing? Why would being

locked in a room with his mother make him sleep, and make his hatred erupt across the dreams of strangers? What was his mother doing in that room that would lead to such hatred?"

These weren't questions.

I knew the answer. There was no need to speak it.

"I assume some sort of abuse was involved," Tsukumojuku said. "The desire to kill himself is the desire to make his flesh disappear. Sleeping and escaping into dreams were ways of escaping his flesh while he was in that locked room with her. Whatever was happening to his flesh was so horrific he had to escape it. Which implies the abuse was likely sexual. But we'll never know the truth. Javier was killed, and Leonora killed herself before her seaman husband, Juan Rovira, returned home. With his family gone, he spoke briefly to Jorge. Whatever happened may have been going on for more than ten years. Juan was absent from home for long periods of time, and quite the philanderer. When Javier was young, Juan often made Leonora cry, but at some point the tears stopped. "I've got Javier," she said. He'd seen the boy comfort her when she cried, so Juan assumed she'd gotten over it, and thought no more about it. He certainly noticed that she doted on the boy, but since that meant less strife for him, he was pleased. In that sense, the cause of the cause lay with Juan Rovira Cortez. One person hurt another, that person hurt someone else in turn, and that person developed a strange power that let them harm a number of strangers, and those strangers created locked rooms and murdered people in them."

The core pattern behind so many of the world's problems.

"Reality is what it is, and webs of misery are all around us, but my point is that Javier Cortez's ability to enter stranger's dreams was a power born of the suffering his mother inflicted. It's nothing but a hypothesis, but I've begun to believe that continual, repetitive suffering can lead to the development of unusual

powers that help the sufferer escape."

Eh? That's quite a thought. Here Tsukumojuku explained a case that had led to him forming a friendship with the other Jorge Joestar. It was another case of child abuse by an insane mother. Poor Antonio Torres, who had his skin peeled off by his mother every year since he was a baby, and when he turned ten developed the ability to shed his entire skin intact once a year.

"Ugh, that's gross!"

"But the cases are remarkably similar, aren't they? Repeated suffering, supernatural abilities. No normal people shed their skin."

"Point taken, but...can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"It might be a little rude."

"I promise not to mind."

"Maybe the world you come from is kinda fucked up. Maybe stuff like that just happens there."

"Hmm...I don't have any grounds to deny the possibility, at the moment."

"I mean, I've never heard of anything like this."

"I'd never heard of anything like that before I met Jorge Joestar. And I only have the two instances of this phenomenon to draw upon."

"See? Sorry, but I just think it's your world that's weird. Everything's normal here."

"I think there are many things about your world that are strange, but perhaps the laws it operates on are simply different from my own."

"Unnh, this tangent's getting scary. Some of these mental images I really didn't need."

"Come to think of it, I had *Antonio Torres, 1900* – his skin – in my luggage...did it arrive here with me? I was gathering my belongings right before I passed out, and I'm certain I had the tube it was in slung over my shoulder."

"Jesus! I really don't want to see that, but I guess we could ask the Katos? That house is done for, but maybe they found something in the rubble."

"Yeah...but it's not that important. If they find it, I'd like it back, of course. Javier Cortez's clown nose and wig were in a different trunk."

"Holy crap."

"Ha. At any rate, that's enough of that tangent. There's another point I really should make; something you need to hear."

"About this other Jorge Joestar?"

"No, about you."

"Yeah?"

Me?

What was he on about? What could he know about me?

"You call yourself a detective, so this shouldn't take long for you to grasp. Have you ever wonder why it is you're able to solve difficult cases and problems that nobody else can? Have you ever found it strange that you always get to the truth in the end? When you find a clue in a book you just happened to be reading, or have an idea triggered by a conversation you happened to have with a complete stranger, or when a criminal close to getting away with it suddenly makes a boneheaded mistake, have you ever wondered if it was one too many coincidences in your favor? Have you ever felt like the world revolved around you? Like God himself was looking after you?"

"Hunh? I mean, I get your drift, but isn't that what a detective is? Luck is part of skill."

"But humans are prone to failure, Jorge Joestar. Everyone

makes mistakes...normally."

"I make mistakes all the time."

"But in the end, you're right."

"Yeah, but I work my ass off."

"Hard work doesn't always lead to results. Normally."

"Normally, shmormally, someone's doing all right you don't stand there hoping they fuck up. What's your point? That I should be less sure I'm a detective?"

"No, quite the opposite. There never any reason to doubt yourself, or that you're a detective. But you should be aware that you are receiving preferential treatment at the hand of an arbitrary god."

"...why? Should I give thanks for it or something?"

"No. I call this god "Beyond" – and I'm certain that this god has lined you and the other Jorge Joestar up for a reason, for some greater purpose. It must have been Beyond's power that sent me here."

"And not because I solved the 15-puzzle?"

"You did. But think of it this way: Beyond set you on that path, and summoned me here. See? What most people imagine when they hear the word god is something all-powerful, that never explains itself to humans, that acts in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. Irrational, devoid of logic. But not here. The god I call Beyond prepared that 15-puzzle for you. I believe that there was a reason why Beyond had to do that. You're a detective, and to some extent the nature of the world becomes predictable. Lords knows, as a detective myself, I'm sick of explaining to people that because I am there, everything has meaning. Just like the arrival of a detective in a mystery novel. In a sense, Beyond is a mystery novelist. Beyond is writing a mystery novel in which you are the detective. And you should be aware of that fact."

Hunh...I understood his point well enough, but... "But why

do I need to know this?"

"I told you. Because there is another Jorge Joestar."

"So what?"

"You said you'd never worked a case at the same time as another detective. But you've read mystery novels where that was the case?"

"I have?" There were a lot of them, these days. "So?"

"Two detectives, one truth. If both are detectives, then both must arrive at the same truth. But does that happen in the novels of this world?"

"Most novels with two detectives have one solve it, then the other discover the real solution hidden behind it."

"At that point, are they both still detectives?"

"Hmm...they're treated like detectives, but certainly, within that novel, the latter is the real detective. But they might switch places in the next novel."

"If it's a series. But what I'm talking about, like I said, isn't in terms of a lifetime, but in terms of each individual case. One volume at a time. There is no next time. You are one of the two detectives. Your life will prove whether you're the real one, or the fake."

Man, this good-lookin' kid was really making everything seem like a giant pain in the ass. I was getting sick of listening to him lecture me.

"Fine, I'll be the fake, whatever. Your friend, this other Jorge Joestar, he can be the real one, it's cool. Ha ha ha. It won't change who I am. Why should I care? Not like being a detective is the only job I can do. There are plenty of others who can do the job instead of me, and I'm happy to leave them to it."

I meant it. Murders and murder cases were hella scary.

Seriously dangerous. Figuring out the tricks was a pain, and last act twists always pissed me off, and I never got off on the praise or gratitude...man, thinking like this really made me wonder why, exactly, I was a detective at all. I didn't really give a damn. I just did it cause I was there; if there was someone else, then I'd rather not.

I think this rattled him, but he kept his poker face, and added, "The two of you are working in parallel, but you aren't both detectives. You're both Jorge Joestars. Are you still fine with being the fake?"

"Course I am," I said. "Didn't I mention it? I'm adopted. You tell me I'm not Jorge Joestar, well...I'm not."

At last I cracked his poker face.

Didn't he think it weird when I gave the name?

"I just assumed a hundred years from now Jorge Joestar might well be a Japanese name," he said, laughing.

"No, no, I mean, some people do have weird names, but most people are all still "Tanaka Tarou" or other super normal names. I guess your name is pretty dang weird, and that might make you less sensitive to odd names? Most modern Japanese have ordinary names with easy to read kanji."

Tsukumojuku sighed deeply. Fffffffffffffff. "I don't even know any more."

I was starting to feel sorry for him. "Sorry, sorry, maybe I shoulda played along more, but I never was a good liar."

"Please, spare me your sympathies."

"Cool. Anyway, where you staying tonight? They'll probably let you sleep at the hospital tonight, but tomorrow?"

"Hmm..."

"You could go check out this non-triangular Bermuda Triangle? I can pay your hospital bill and travel expenses. Not like you know anyone else here."

Except maybe the Katos.

Nobody lived in the house in Nishi Akatsuki; they might be distantly related but distant was the key word there, and when he'd arrived he'd pretty much demolished their house, so. It might not be his fault, technically, but it was hard to blame them if they had it in for him. Might be best to avoid trouble. Maybe researching their family tree might get me somewhere. "Or do you want to meet with...some people who might be descendants of your family?"

"Well...I'd like to check if my luggage came with me, at least, so I'd at least like to speak to the people from the demolished house briefly. I don't know if we're really related, but I suppose I could try working as a detective here awhile. I don't know much about this world, though, not at all sure I could be a detective here. Might be easier to just get a normal job if I need money."

"Yeah. Well, tonight just get some sleep. You had quite a trip, and nearly drowned. You must be exhausted."

"But I wouldn't want my things thrown out with the rubble..."

"Don't worry about that! Serika was still reeling from the shock of it all. They're staying the night at a hotel somewhere, I'm sure. The police will have to work the scene over, too, so we can go check it out tomorrow."

"Okay. Thank you, Jorge Joestar."

"Cool. Hmm. If you do decide to head for the Bermuda Triangle, I'll come with. It'll be rough traveling on your own in the new world, and I'd love to see what going to another world looks like."

"...thanks. But...I can't explain why, but I think you shouldn't come to my world. There's no telling what would happen if two Jorge Joestars met."

Some sort of time travel paradox?

"Then I'll let him be Jorge Joestar. Whatever. I'm not the same guy as that Jorge Joestar, so how can there be a paradox?"

"...there's no telling what Beyond will have in store."

This again. I was starting to despise that word.

"Okay, okay, I'd love to see another world, but I doubt I could survive long without the last hundred years of technology, so I'll stay on this side. Do you even have trains or jets? Getting home sounds like a pain."

"Mm."

"In our world, you can probably get there in three hours by airplane, Narita to JFK."

The Bermuda Triangle point was at the tip of Manhattan Island. I'll be anything it's right where the Statue of Liberty stands.

"Narita? From Narita Mountain?"

"Yeah. JFK is named after John Fitzgerald Kennedy, former president, it's an airport on Manhattan Island."

"Hunh...Manhattan, so America? A president who probably hasn't even been born yet in my world. The history of my world and yours might be different, so maybe he'll never exist."

"Right. Truth is, if this is your future, you might be better off not knowing much about it."

"You think so?"

"Maybe better not to think too much about it." At this point my phone rang. It was Shirai. "Hello?"

"Jorge, you got a minute?"

"Yeah."

"Bingo, buddy. Their dreams clinched it."

"....eh! Already? Really!?"

My eyes met Tsukumojuku's. His eyes looked very sad. Did we have our own Javier Cortez? If there was sexual abuse going on, I was already feeling down.

"The second we brought up dreams, they all jumped,"

Shirai went on. "They'd forgotten all about them till the moment we mentioned it. But every one of them described a man with a hat pulled down over his eyes. He showed up in their dreams, and told every one of them the same thing. 'When the police arrest you, if they ask about dreams, tell them this. "If Jorge Joestar ever comes to Morioh, I'll kill him."' He used your name, Jorge! Every one of the fifteen said the same thing, not a syllable out of place. Like the same guy put a message in all their dreams. They knew his name, too. 'Kira Yoshikage.' This is fucked up, Jorge. Never heard the like. You'd better stay the hell away from this."

Hunh? Morioh?

Where the hell was that? Who was this guy? Who was Kira Yoshikage?

Was he not just replacing Javier Cortez as the Locked Room Maestro, but also sending me a warning through them?

"Creepy! Hell no, I'm not going there," I said.

Shirai didn't buy it. "No, seriously, Jorge. There's danger and there's danger, right? We still need your help on stuff here, don't you dare go."

"I said I'm not going."

"And when you say that you always go the weirdest places." He knew me pretty well by now.

"But man, it's like he's telling me to come!"

"Don't! This dude can enter people's dreams! That's fucked up!"

"Ah, but you saying that is like waving a red flag."

"It's seriously dangerous. I knew we deal with all kinds of weird stuff on this job, but some dudes are on another level. This is definitely that other level. Beyond human comprehension."

Shit like that just made me more interested! I didn't say

that, though. I was wound up enough. "Anyway, thank you," I said, and hung up. I filled Tsukumojuku in. "So I basically have to go, right?"

"HMMMMMMMM...yeah," Tsukumojuku said. "But I'm gonna stay out of it. Jorge and I already solved our version of the case, and I've got other things to do and think about."

True enough, I supposed. "Then leave this one to me. But I really will pay your bills and travel expenses. Tell you what, I'll take you to Manhattan, watch you pop through the triangle to the other world, and then go to Morioh."

I quickly did a search for Morioh on my phone. Found it.

Up Northeast, off the coast near S City. Never been there. Never even heard of it. But someone there wanted me to stay away.

"All right, this'll be fun. I'm off home. I'll swing by tomorrow, bring you a phone. It'll be under my name, but give us a way to talk," I said.

Tsukumojuku bowed, to my surprise.

"Hey, now..."

"Thank you for all your kindness. After all, we met just hours ago. It seems both Jorge Joestars are gentlemen. I truly believe that there is meaning in my meeting you like this."

"Ha ha, okay. Maybe there is, but no need to get all formal. It reeks of hundred year old manners. Over here we're more relaxed, right?"

"Heh heh, my Jorge and I were quite 'relaxed', I assure you. But I am grateful. I may be a burden to you for a while yet, for which I apologize. At the moment it seems I have no one else to rely on."

"Sure. Anyway, I'm going home. See ya."

"Tomorrow, then."

I gave him my business card, and left feeling like he was a

weird guy, and the way we met was weird, but somehow, we'd end up being good friends. Woke up the next morning, and while I was getting dressed word came that Tsukumojuku was dead.

His body was found in Morioh.

Shit, I thought. Someone *really* wanted me there.

That was never a warning at all. It was always an invitation.

Hmph.

I was going even without you killing Tsukumojuku, shit for brains. What a waste! There was no reason for him to die.

THREE
Wounds
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Tsukumojuku was missing, presumed dead, and it seemed my days of adventure had ended. I went to school, barely spoke to anyone but Mum, and had my nose in a book all day long, at school or at home. Even though I'd had no friends as a child, and rarely went outside, I'd not been much of a reader. But being friends with Tsukumojuku and seeing how he used the information he'd learned to help him solve cases and increase the flexibility of his thought processes made me incapable of remaining ignorant. But I still hated studying and never really took school seriously, so I couldn't really keep up with the other students. So I decided to start small, with novels. Mother had quite a collection of English novels overflowing our bookshelves. Since there was a detective, I started with Sherlock Holmes, but after visting the scene of real crimes with Tsukumojuku it just seemed so tame and stiff, so I gave up. I then tried Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and Emily Brontë, but it was H. G. Wells I fell in love with. *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Invisible Man* – all science fantasy, all terrific. They even made me like science. When Mum saw me reading a book on science she suggested we hire a tutor. She'd never really been one for forced study or early bedtimes, but she had a keen eye to when I might be open to such a suggestion, so I didn't feel moved turn her down. I had an idea who might be a good tutor; a girl Tsukumojuku and I had met on our last case, the one who'd helped us finally catch Javier Cortez. Her name was Penelope de la Roza. She had a pathological fear of clowns, so when Javier had haunted her dreams disguised as a clown and tried to convince her to commit a locked room murder, the blow to her system had been so extreme she'd quit school and never left the house. She was quite the beauty, and I thought maybe sharing some stories of good times with Tsukumojuku might help cheer her up a bit.

But when I went to see her things didn't go so well. She barely gave me the time of day.

"Sorry, but seeing you makes me remember the clown in my

dreams, and I get scared."

Whoops. Clearly, I'd been tactless. Now that she mentioned it while Javier had been after her Penelope had been in a state of panic, and was perpetually shivering, even in broad daylight.

"Oh. Sorry to just drop in like this, then. I didn't mean to upset you," I said, and turned to leave.

"I'm sorry too, Jorge," she said, from the other side of the door she refused to open. "You came all this way. I can't stop myself thinking about the clown, but...I was glad to see you, and honestly, it's something of a relief to talk to someone like this."

I was very glad to hear it.

Also, even though nearly everyone I'd met solving cases was Spanish, they all pronounced Jorge 'George' – Tsukumojuku's parting gift. That thought made me sad, but there was a warmth to that sadness. I went home.

But the next evening, Penelope came to see me, looking very upset.

"Jorge!" she yelled from outside. Surprised, I got out of bed. I glanced at the clock; it was 1:30 AM. For a moment I wondered if I'd dreamt it, but then she yelled again. "Jorge Joestar!"

I cracked the curtains, and Penelope was standing outside the front door.

"What is it, Penelope?" "You've got to help! You've got to do something!" "Do something about what? Calm down!" "How can I? He's back! Javier Cortez is back! It's all your fault! Nothing happened until yesterday!"

Javier? This made no sense. The islanders killed him and dumped his body in the sea. "Okay, wait a second, I'll be right out." I left the window, went downstairs, and burst out the front door. Penelope was shivering in a sleeveless dress and a pair of sandals. She did not appear to be harmed. Just terrified; she collapsed into my arms as I approached. Her body was horrifyingly cold to the touch. "Aughhhh!" she wailed, clinging to me. "I'm so scared! Javier Cortez is still after me!"

"He isn't," I said. "He's dead. You saw the body." They'd beaten him with stones and farm implements until his skull split open. There's no way he could have survived. "It was just a dream. Don't worry. He no longer exists."

Penelope pulled away, and glared at me. "No, it wasn't a dream! It really happened! He came to my house!"

"He couldn't have," I said, growing melancholy. Perhaps Penelope had genuinely gone crazy.

Frustrated, Penelope yelled through her tears, "It's true! And he ran ahead of me on the way here, jumping out at me!"

Jumping out at her?

"What do you mean? I'll hear you out, just calm down and start from the beginning."

"Look...after you came to visit yesterday, I went back to my room. The door was locked from the inside, and so were the windows. I couldn't get in."

".....?"

"It was a locked room! I thought there had to be someone in there at first...I was scared, so I went to the kitchen, where my mother was. But the kitchen door slammed shut right in front of me. It was locked from the inside! I got scared, and called out, and she started screaming! 'Ahhh! There's somebody in here!' Now both of us are in a panic, and trying to open the door, but it won't open. Cortez wanted me to kill my mother, remember? She knew that, so she thought it was me again, and yelled, 'Don't do it, Penny! Stop! Don't kill me!' I would never do that! Cortez is dead, and I'm back to normal! I was so worried about her I tried to kick the door down, but it wouldn't open. That's how you and Tsukumojuku used to get in the locked rooms, right?"

In an emergency, yes. If events were still in progress, we'd attempt to intervene, but normally we'd try to preserve the scene, and look for a key or another way in. Or make another way in. People making locked rooms often took a broken down door into account, and would often try and use that to hide evidence. We

didn't want to give them the satisfaction.

"But my kick didn't do a damn thing to that door, so I started throwing myself into it, over and over. At last it broke, and I came rushing in, just in time to see a clown in the corner before it disappeared. I froze to spot. I couldn't move. Mother was hiding behind the sofa, hysterical. At last she came out and came over to me, but she blames me for everything. She thought I was trying to kill her again. She's sure I hate her now."

Penelope's parents had divorced four years ago, and Penelope's mother had full custody. Penelope had blamed her for taking away her father. Their relationship had been strained to begin with, and when Penelope started dating a man named Edvard, a thug who beat her and sold anything she owned of value, Isabella – her mother – tried to convince her to break up with him. Edvard played the two of them off against each other, leaving Penelope alone in the world. He threatened to ruin Penelope permanently if Isabella interfered. In the end, Isabella gave up on her daughter. Then the clown started showing up in Penelope's dreams. Face covered in white, with bright circles round his eyes and mouth, a huge grin, a cheery manner, lots of big gestures and calls to the crowd. Penelope found his ridiculous nature deeply frightening. She couldn't move; her body covered in a cold sweat, her heart beating so fast it seemed like it was beating right into her brain. She couldn't even look away, and her breathing grew so shallow she was barely conscious enough to think. Occasionally her eyes even rolled back in her head and she fainted – while still asleep and dreaming. The only person she could talk to about this fear had been Isabella.

"She's the only one I can trust. I finally realized that, but no matter how many times I tell her, she..." Penelope started crying again. I have no idea what to do when girls cry. I just stood there awkwardly, and waited for her to stop. "So, um," she continued, still crying. "I went over to the window where the clown was – very slowly, ready to run. And I found this." She held out a doll, about

the size of her palm. It had no clothes, and a shapeless face with eyes and a wide open mouth stitched on. The eyes were white circles with no pupils, and there was blood streaming out of the mouth down its chin. There was a hangman's noose tied around its neck.

"It's..."

"Dead. It's supposed to be me, I'm sure. It's a warning. I'm going to die. Someone's going to murder me. Soon."

"That won't happen," I said, but I had no basis for this. And Penelope knew that. Still, I thought, this was all happening because I thoughtlessly went to see her. Nothing like this had happened before today. "Why don't you come in?" I said. I led her up on the porch, and tried to open the door.

It was locked from the inside.

Mum? Why would she shut us out...?

"Jorge?" Her voice came from inside. "Run!"

"? What? Open the door, Mum."

Suddenly terrified, I began rattling the knob, but the door wouldn't budge.

"Listen to me, Jorge. You have to run."

"Mum! Open this door! What's going on!?"

"There's a clown in here."

A clown?

"Eeek!" Penelope squeaked. She backed away, almost falling down the two steps up to the porch. "Oh...Jorge...sorry...I think I brought it with me..."

This made no sense. Javier Cortez was dead. I didn't believe in ghosts. Someone living must be doing this.

I'd learned that much after four years as Tsukumoju's friend.

There were no ghosts. There was no magic. Curses only worked on the emotions of those that believed in them. The Chinese were not wizards, and there were no drugs or poisons with special properties that favored the criminals. Everything had

meaning. Everything could be explained logically.

The clown on the other side of this door could be explained, too. Mysterious clowns only existed in dreams!

I put my back into it and kicked the door down. Crassssh! I'd kicked a lot of doors down, working with Tsukumojuku, but this was definitely my best ever attempt. The door broke free of the lock, flew inwards, and did a full 180, slamming against the inside wall.

"Mum!" I yelled, bursting in. Then I saw it; a clown floating in the air, and my Mum facing it down.

The clown...did exist.

"Aiiieeee!" Penelope screeched, behind me.

Okay, so the clown was real. Penelope could see it too. A fat little white clown. White hair, white make up, puffy white clothes.

"Penelope! Wait outside!" I yelled, and grabbed a nearby chair with one hand. Strike before you think! I swung the chair through the air, and hit the clown with it. "Rraaaagh!" Schuuun! The chair zipped through the air. The clown vanished...no, it broke into the pieces.

What the!?! The chair hit the floor. This wasn't a ghost. I'd never seen a ghost, but this clown didn't vanish like mist or smoke, it shattered into tiny pieces – they were hard to make out, but they were still in the air in front of me.

"Mum, you get out of here," I said.

"Calm down, Jorge," Mum said, behind me. "I don't think the clown means us any harm."

"?what makes you say that?"

"I was quite surprised when it appeared and all the doors and windows slammed shut. But when that girl outside – Penelope? – appeared, I understood. I don't know how, but I believe Penelope is making that clown. She's making it to protect herself."

".....hunh....?"

"Jorge? Are you okay?" Penelope asked.

I turned around, and Penelope had come back up the steps

onto the porch, and was looking in the door.

"Penelope, don't –" come in, I meant to say, but suddenly the door slammed shut, and the floating clown manifested in the shadows behind it. Penelope's shriek and my yelp of surprise overlapped. The clown ignored us both, dragged a heavy side table over to the door, and wedged it under the doorknob. Locking us in.

We were in a locked room.

"Jorge! Run!" Penelope screamed. "I'm so sorry! I brought him here!"

But the clown never looked at me. It just stared at the door, at Penelope on the other side of it.

Chair in hand, I moved slowly closer. The clown didn't turn around. I studied it closely. There were cracks on the surface of it here and there, and I could see inside; there was nothing in there. It was all surface. A hollow clown.

I moved even closer. The cracks in the clown had frayed edges. I put my face right next to it, and could see the threads. This clown was woven out of thread. What thread?

I found a single thread dangling down from the clown's hip. I followed it with my eyes. It ran along the floor, and through the gap under the front door.

"Penelope, step back."

"Sniff, okay. I'm sorry."

She was crying again. I listened for her footsteps on the stairs, then moved the side table aside and opened the door.

"Eeeeeek, look out, Jorge! Behind you!" Penelope screamed. She must have seen the clown behind me, so I stepped out on the porch and closed the door. "Oh! Good, are you okay, Jorge? Come over here. There was a clown right behind you!" The white thread ran across the porch, down the steps, and over to Penelope. Hmm. "Wait, Jorge! Your mother!? She's still in there with the clown! We have to save her!" Penelope bravely started up the stairs again, so I put my arms around her. She was the one who needed saving.

"Wh-what are you doing, Jorge?" she said, struggling. "The

clown!"

My hands were resting on her shoulders, and I could tell her sleeveless dress was now held on by a single string over each shoulder. In the night air, her shoulders were very cold.

"My Mum's fine," I said. Penelope stopped struggling. She was still scared and confused, but she was standing still now. My arms were around her, pulling her to me. Fighting the force of her fear.

It had happened again, I thought. Just like Javier Cortez's power over dreams, and Antonio Torres' skin shedding, constant fear and suffering had given her strange powers.

I remembered how the trick Javier Cortez had wanted Penelope to use had involved a thread running under the door to turn the key. A very simple trick. It would have bored Tsukumojuku to tears, but the fear it had given Penelope was so great it had led to this mysterious power.

I cursed the fear itself silently, holding her close.

Eventually the thread from Penelope's dress snapped, a doll in a noose dropped behind the door, and Mum brought it out. I took it, showed it to Penelope, and unraveled it before her eyes. There was a loose thread coming out of the doll's hip, and one tug on that was all it took. The doll came apart that easily.

"I know this is hard to believe, but you made all of this, Penelope. The clown, the locked room, and this doll. You are much too scared of that clown that wanted you to commit a locked room murder. You couldn't take the constant fear, and it gave you a strange power, the ability to make locked rooms. But since you don't want to do that, you make the clown do it, and because you don't want to kill anyone, you kill this doll. And it all gets shut inside a locked room."

Penelope didn't believe me, of course. She couldn't see inside the physical locked room, or into the depths of her own

heart. I just had to hope she'd get used to it in time.

But wherever Penelope went, no matter what door she drew near, her fear slammed it shut, made a locked room, a clown appeared inside, and a doll was hung. And that just fueled her fear.

I got used to it quickly enough. I had never been afraid of clowns, or locked rooms.

I explained it to Isabella, and had her observe the power in action, but she remained terrified and convinced Penelope had been possessed by the devil, so I talked it over with Mum, and we decided to have Penelope come live with us. Our house was probably the largest on La Palma, with plenty of rooms. Mum was a majority stockholder in a successful English company called the Speedwagon Company, so we didn't lack for money, and she ran a trading company of her own with ships and warehouses in every port in the Canary Islands. She hired Penelope to work in the La Palma office. And to be my tutor.

Just standing in front of a door caused it to slam shut and form a locked room, leaving Penelope quaking in the shadow of the clown, but I went with her to work, and walked with her around the house, and in time locked rooms stopped showing up at the office and our house. Frankly, I was somewhat disappointed. I mean, just standing in front of a door made Penelope's clothes unravel? La Palma was hot all year and nobody wore that many clothes to begin with. Penelope wore sun dresses, and maaaaybe a light shawl over her shoulders, and that's it. Having that unravel, the surface area rapidly shrinking...oh my. Naturally I said nothing, pretending to be focused on the problem and not to have noticed anything, but Boys, girls see right through this. She picked up on my furtive glances, and rapidly covered herself with pillows or nearby bed sheets. "I still can't believe it, but that grin on your face makes me think it has to be true."

Eh? I was grinning? Craaap, I mean, sorry, Penelope, you're

really scaring me here! I was all flustered every time but Penelope was never really all that mad at me, thankfully. Would I ever be a proper gentleman?

Apparently not.

One day in February, six months after Penelope moved into the Joestar residence, and a while after she'd been able to go to work on her own, she asked me to go with her again. "Sorry, Jorge. Just for today, I promise. Yesterday I just got this idea in my head that someone was following me. I'm scared to go on my own."

Usually my job was to go, "You made this locked room, Penelope." Or, "The clown's made of thread, and it'll turn into a doll in a few minutes, so there's no need to be frightened." But this sounded more like actual bodyguard work. I was getting nervous already. I mean, when I was working with Tsukumojuku we used to burst in on murder scenes, and chase killers around, and catch them, but most of the work was done by Tsukumojuku and the police, while I hovered nearby shrieking. I didn't ever really fight at all, and I still had no real confidence in my left hook. The only thing I'd really gained from those experiences was courage? Or so I thought but apparently I hadn't even managed that, because when I tried to stand up from the breakfast table and say I'd go to work with her my legs were shaking so much I couldn't walk straight, and stumbled into the table. All the dishes rattled. Crap, that was a little too frightened. I even surprised myself.

"Oh, Jorge...sorry. Are you okay? You don't have to come." Penelope smiled bravely. "I'll be fine."

Augh, she totally knew I was scared. But even though I was embarrassed part of me was super relieved she said that, and looking forward to getting back to sipping my coffee. Pathetic. I hadn't improved one iota since grade school.

But before I could say anything, Mum stepped in. "No, Jorge, you have to go with Penelope." At least I maintained my

dignity. Maybe. But in the sense that both of them knew exactly what I was thinking probably not at all. I suddenly had a very bad feeling about the day.

But I left the house with Penelope. She thoughtfully chose to be super chatty to keep my mind off things, but my head was full of all the times Antonio's gang had come after me, and it felt like a dark cloud was hovering over my head, that I was sure it would bring bad luck.

Of course, Antonio Torres was dead, and his primary cohort Julio had long since lost interest, so neither of them showed up. But on the way to the office, there was a road that cut through the middle of an open field, and waiting for us was Penelope's ex, the bad bad Edvard Noriega.

I froze to the spot, my mind blank. Penelope glared at him.

"Hey, Penny! Long time no see." "...what? What do you want?" "I just wanted to see how you were getting on." "I don't want to see your face ever again." "Don't say that! I'm dying here." "You heard I was working for the Joestars, right? I'm not lending you money, and no matter what trouble you're in, you'll get no help from me." "That's not it...I got no money, true, but I don't need that. I...I saw something strange..."

Mm? Strange? That word finally snapped me out of it. Edvard was nothing like he'd been when Tsukumojuku and I last spoke to him. Where once he'd been an alpha male, and treated Penelope like his property, now Edvard was genuinely terrified, his voice shaking, his face pale. He was downright begging for Penelope's help.

"Come on, Jorge. Leave him be. He's a great actor, always was good at making people pity him," Penelope snapped.

Really? Acting? This was a performance?

"No...I'm serious! Listen, please! I saw this creepy guy, with wings..."

"Shut up and go away!"

"I was so scared...it was too dark to see his face, but he's

after me..."

"I don't care! Take care of it yourself!"

"I just know he's gonna kill me, Penny. Have a heart...you gotta listen. He's like a like a moth in the night, tapping softly on the wall..."

"Shut up shut up shut up! You never once listened to a word I said about the clown! Serves you right!"

"I couldn't be sorrier about that, honest. It was all my fault, so please, just stop a second. Don't go digging up the past. Listen, two nights ago I went out to see this girl I've been seeing, Prunella..."

"I don't want to hear about it!"

"You gotta listen! I don't love her anything like as much as I loved you, I swear!"

"I don't care! You'd better stop, or...!"

Penelope was so angry now she stopped walking. How could she not be? When the case with Javier Cortez broke, Edvard had split, without even saying good-bye. Even after Penelope had shut herself in Isabella said she'd spent a while waiting for him to come back. And now he shows up, talking about his new girlfriend, even though he'd never bothered breaking up with his old one. The worst thing a man could do, let alone an ex.

"So I was lying in bed with Prunella, when I suddenly woke up."

"Did you not hear me say stop? I don't! Want! To hear it!" Penelope roared.

I knew how she felt, but her anger was so explosive it scared me. "Come on now, just ignore him, let's go," I said, trying to calm her down and pull her away. Then I saw her face. There were veins bulging on her foreheads. Her lips were curled back, bearing her teeth. She looked downright...mad. This wasn't going to work. Penelope was beyond the help of words.

But Edvard was too wrapped up in his own affairs to notice.

"He was standing at the base of the bed. Black as the devil,

but so quiet he hardly seemed real..."

Something red trickled down from Penelope's nose. Blood. She was so furious there was blood running down her chin.

"If you don't stop talking I'll kill you," she said. I was too scared to try and stop her.

While I dithered, there was burst of wind around me. Had the wind changed? No, there was a rumbling below me, and the sound was moving, coming closer. What the!?

I looked around, half expecting to see all the dogs and cats on the island rushing towards me, but nope. What was actually happening was far more terrifying.

The ground itself was moving. Scrrrrrrrrrnh! It swirled, gathering itself around us. A mound of earth raced by, like a carnivore hell-bent on devouring the crops. It passed behind me, heading for Edvard.

"I knew he wasn't a thief, or nothing. Thieves don't watch people when they sleep. They don't wear clothes that make them look like they got wings..."

"I'm gonna kill you, Edvard! Stop it now, or you will die?"

Both of them kept talking, oblivious to the other. Penelope's nose bleed had dyed her chest red, and Edvard's eyes were focused on nothing – the very fact that he hadn't noticed what was going on was possibly the most frightening part of all this. Look!

I opened my mouth to yell, but the dirt and grass around him heaved, and four walls shot up around him.

But Edvard didn't stop mumbling. "I was too scared to get up. Then he spoke. 'Close your eyes, lie down, and think about tomorrow,' he said."

He was about to be swallowed in a five meter wide square of dirt. "I said stop," Penelope hissed, another squirt of blood shooting out of her nose. I took one look at her and knew this was all her doing.

"I don't know what he meant, but I knew one thing...this black winged man was going to do something awful to me..."

Just before the earth walls swallowed Edvard completely, I saw a black figure standing behind him. It had a round nose, and a hat, and big hair.

A clown.

The walls closed together on top, closing Edvard in with the dirt clown. The locked room was complete.

"If you'd stopped, you'd have lived!" Penelope raged.

Penelope had finally learned to make a locked room without using her clothes. And the evil clown inside.

Part of me was actually impressed. Penelope's wound had given her concrete power, and she'd turned it into a weapon.

Given the source of her powers, I immediately decided to call it a Wound. Injury was too coarse, and Trauma sounded too medical, and the implication that it was mental suffering was too strong. This wound was both physical and emotional, and grew over time.

But this was no time to go naming things! Was I an idiot? I had time to be weirdly impressed later!

"No, Penelope! Stop!" I said, forcing myself to speak. "Don't kill him!"

Penelope didn't even look at me. "It's not me."

Of course not. It was the clown.

"Edvard! Run!" I yelled, dashing towards the locked room. There was no door, or window. Just the walls. Grass woven tightly together, dirt plugging up the cracks. I tried yanking on the grass but the holes filled quickly with more grass and dirt. The walls were alive.

"Aaaaaaugh!" Edvard screamed inside.

Had the clown got its noose on him?

Fundamentally, the point of a locked room murder was to make a murder look like a suicide. But if Edvard died like this, and someone found him, would the police think he built a room of dirt and grass and hung himself inside?

I didn't know. But without evidence showing how the locked

room was built, without proof it was murder, would the police have any other choice but to rule it a suicide? If so, Penelope's locked room murder would be a success.

But I wouldn't let that happen.

I wouldn't let Penelope murder anyone!

I ripped into the grass and dirt walls, forcing a hole open. I had to work faster than the automatic recovery. I got the hole large enough to check on Edvard. I couldn't see most of him, but his feet were dangling in the air, kicking. He was hanging.

"Stop, Penelope! Don't make a locked room! Break this locked room down!" I shouted, making the hole even wider. Before the grass and dirt could fill it in I dove in.

"No! Don't, Jorge! Come out of there!" Before Penelope's cry finished, the wall closed behind me, muffling her voice.

I turned around just in time to see the hole close completely. Edvard was dangling from the ceiling, a rope of grass around his neck. Behind him, an earthen clown dangled upside down from the ceiling.

Why had I jumped in here? "Aaaaaaugh!" I yelled. There was a snap as the grass rope dropped down from the ceiling and pulled tight around my neck. It yanked me into the air, hard. The grass dug into my throat, breaking the skin, but I barely noticed. The weight of my body nearly made me black out instantly. Luckily, my neck didn't break, but the noose was choking off my windpipe and jugulars, cutting off the flow of air to my brain. With my blood not moving, my entire body gasped for oxygen. The pain was so great I tried desperately to loosen or break the noose, but it wouldn't budge. Instead, more tendrils slithered down, weaving themselves into the noose, making it stronger. I was starting to panic. The dirt clown moved its face next to mine, watching me die. Now I was really panicking, but I couldn't! Not now! My legs couldn't reach the ground and this clown was going to make sure I died! I wasn't getting out of this by brute forcing my way free!

Think! I had to think!

How could I break the locked room?

Penelope!

Could Penelope save me?

No. She'd made the locked room. Penelope had no idea what was happening inside it. Anything that happened would be the clown's fault, in her mind. Penelope was even less aware that she was doing all this than the clown staring emotionlessly into my eyes. After Edvard and I were dead, she'd cry a while, tell everyone a clown killed us in some mysterious locked room, and then forget all about it the moment the funerals were over. I couldn't rely on her at all!

I had to think of a way to break the locked room myself! Without brute force!? But that just might be possible! If I could break the *idea* of a locked room, somehow! The point of a locked room was to make murder look like suicide. If I could make provide evidence that this *was* murder...if I could leave that behind somehow, so that the police would have to investigate further! Then that would destroy the locked room's function!

"Grrrrraagh!" I yelled, not because of this idea but because the pancakes and tea I'd had for breakfast had come up my throat and were dripping back down into my wind pipe. Shit. My breakfast was going to kill me before this noose did. I had to hurry. But carefully. I couldn't screw this up! I pulled my knife out of my back pocket. It was a pocket knife, mostly designed for opening wine; the blade was three centimeters long. I kept it around for self-defense because I was pathetic, but today I was very grateful to have it.

I pulled my shirt up, and stabbed the knife into my bare belly. "Glrarraraaagh!" I yelled, gargling the vomit in my windpipe. My vision was getting blurry. I could barely see. I knew the clown was still there, though. There was a shrill ringing in my eyes, and I was about to pass out entirely, but I couldn't panic!

I had to write!

Feeling my way across my belly with the knife, I wrote.

A message. That the clown would have to read.

"MURDER"

Nice and simple.

I barely made it. While I was writing the final R I lost consciousness, and the world went black before my eyes. I saw a tiny light in the darkness, and wondered if that was the entrance to the afterlife. It seemed so warm. Should I jump on in? No, no, I wasn't done with this world yet, but...? Just as I was starting to feel rather rapturous, my ass hit the ground, the ceiling opened, sunlight streamed in, and I threw up more than I've ever thrown up before. Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarggh. Blrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaarrggghh. Brrrraaaaarrarrrraaagggghhagggghggghggghargh.

Once my stomach and lungs and pipes were totally clear I felt so happy I wondered if I could split this joy with Penelope, who was clutching me and crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Edvard was unconscious but alive. I was relieved to see it. My belly throbbed, but it would heal in time.

Or so I thought, but apparently I'd dug a little too deep, and the word murder would remain upside-down on my belly forever. When the doctor told me this I gaped at him, and Penelope started crying again, and a familiar voice from the hospital room door yelled, "Jorge! Who did that to you!?" and I turned to look and saw Lisa Lisa standing there, a little taller, her hair much longer, and even more beautiful. I hid my bare belly, and Penelope wiped her eyes and stopped crying.

"They're still bullying you!? 'Murder'? Is that a threat? Jorge, what have you got yourself mixed up in!?" Lisa Lisa was jumping to conclusions. Four years had done wonders for her but

the gulf between her insides and out was already getting on my nerves.

"No, no, I did this myself." "Don't lie to me! Nobody would ever do that!" "I had a good reason." "Then explain it to me this instant!" "Shut up! I don't have to explain everything I do to you!" I said, dismissively. Lisa Lisa clamped her mouth shut, her lip quivering, tears in her eyes.

Aw, crap.

"Um, sorry," Penelope said, standing up. "It's all my fault."

"Forget it, Penelope. It doesn't matter now."

"But..."

"This is the Penelope Mama Erina mentioned?" Lisa Lisa said, glaring at us. "I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm..."

"Lisa Lisa, right? Jorge and Erina told me about you."

"Don't you call me Lisa Lisa. My name is Elizabeth Straits, Señorita."

I cringed. Fireworks were flying between them. Penelope looked ready to make a locked room around Lisa Lisa, and summon that clown. I had do something, so I forced myself to speak. "What brings you here, Lisa Lisa? You coming home with us? Mum will be glad to see you. Or did you already talk to her? Did you go see her first? I suppose you wouldn't know to come here otherwise. We kept your room the way you left it so..."

"Finding you here was a coincidence, Jorge," Lisa Lisa interrupted. "I had a question for the doctor here, and saw you'd been hurt...I was a little surprised, that's all." Her tone had softened, to my relief.

"A question for me?" The doctor said.

"Have you had patients coming here claiming to have seen a man with wings? Or a man like a moth?"

So much for my relief.

I had just heard that exact story.

Listen, please! I saw this creepy guy, with wings...

Edvard's words.

Penelope looked as stunned as I was.

"Yeah," the doctor said. "We've had a lot of patients wondering if they were having a nervous breakdown."

Lisa Lisa nodded, as if she'd expected that answer. "I checked with the police as well. They have quite a collection of reports of this man, and the citizens have formed a watch to search for him."

Eh? Really? I had no idea. I barely ever left the house, so I was out of touch with the goings on around town.

"At first I thought it was a trick of the light, or an illusion," the doctor said, "But more and more people came, so I was forced to conclude it's some sort of mass hysteria. A delusion everyone believed." He paused, and sighed deeply. "But truth is, he came to me last night. This man with black wings. He really exists. That was no delusion. I...don't know if he's of this world or not, but he is real."

".....!"

The delusion even reached the doctor? Should he still be examining people? I looked at Lisa Lisa, concerned.

"Do you remember what happened five years ago, Jorge? When Straits and the others came, and told everyone not to leave their houses?"

Of course I remembered. A chill ran down my spine. "Is that happening again?"

"Yes. This time we will be thorough."

I was scared now.

"He spoke to me," the doctor said, his eyes as glazed over as Edvard's had been. "**Close your eyes, lie down, and think about tomorrow,**' he said." The exact same line, word for word. Even scarier.

"Don't do as he says, Doctor," Lisa Lisa said. "Lock yourself in your house tonight, and if anything frightens you, retreat even

farther inside."

The way she put it was the scariest.

"What happened five years ago?" Penelope asked me. "I remember locking myself in, but..." I couldn't begin to answer.

The three of us walked home in silence to find Straits and Mum sipping tea in the parlor. The mood was hardly pleasant. In fact, it was so tense I wanted to cry. There was no escape anywhere. Everything on the island was terrifying.

After greeting them, Lisa Lisa said, "Mama Erina, I think it's time Jorge knew the truth about what happened to his father."

Mum put her teacup on the table. "Yes, I suppose you're ready to hear the story, even if it is a frightening one."

Nonononononono I definitely wasn't but I couldn't say that or even shake my head I was already too scared to move.

"Should I wait in my room?" Penelope asked.

Mum shook her head. "You should stay, too. This story concerns not just the Joestar family, but all mankind."

And then she told the story.

I had known the name Dio – god in both Italian (Dio) and Spanish (Dios) – as the name of an uncle of no blood relation. My father had uncovered a plot of Dio's to slowly poison my grandfather, George, and when the police came to arrest him, he'd resisted, and the Joestar mansion had burned to the ground. That much was as I'd heard it, but the ending was different. Dio did not die. Mum's story began with that correction.

Dio Brando – he'd kept the name, even after being adopted by the Joestars – had stabbed my grandfather right in front of Jonathan and the police, then put on a stone mask that had been found in an Aztec ruin in Mexico. He'd wiped blood across the surface of it and long needles had shot out and stabbed him in the

head. What should have killed him instead turned him into a vampire. He destroyed the police with ferocious strength, and fought with my father. In the end, both survived the fire with substantial injuries. My father met a man named Will A Zeppeli who taught him a secret method of breathing based on ripples, called Hamon breathing. Armed with this technique, my father fought Dio again in a small English town called Wind Knight's Lot. Dio could rob a body of all heat in an instant, and my father seemed close to losing, but managed to turn the tables and emerge victorious. But he failed to confirm the kill (according to Lisa Lisa's evaluation) and let the vampire fall into the valley. While Dio's body had been destroyed by my father's Hamon, he managed to cut off his own head before the Hamon reached it, and survived.

He lay low for two months, without a body, surviving with the help of his zombies. Then he snuck aboard the ship my parents were taking their honeymoon on, and fought my father a third time. As my mother reached the engine room they were fighting in, some sort of bodily fluid light beam shot out of Dio's eyes, and pierced my father's hands and throat. On the brink of death, my father used his last breath to send Hamon rippling through a zombie that attacked, manipulating the zombie into destroying the ship and the zombies on it. My mother wanted to die with him, but he convinced her to take baby Lisa Lisa, found crying near her mother's corpse, and climb into the special box Dio had constructed. Two days later she was found floating in the box by some fisherman from the Canary Islands...

When this long, insane story ended, Straits said, "Ever since Dio opened the long lost door to the land of the dead, complex echoes of fate and causality have led to dark powers rearing their heads in many lands, and we have been unable to stop the fallout from these completely. On this islands it seems another zombie or vampire has appeared. Even though we thought we killed them all

five years ago."

I remembered the sunlight turning Mr. Hernandez to dust, and the...the Hamon? Lisa Lisa had used to destroy Alejandro Torres, and couldn't stop shaking. "This is an island," Lisa Lisa said. "Vampires and zombies can't come here by land. There are larger islands, more populated islands, but this is the second incident on La Palma. We're starting to wonder if there's a stone mask on this land."

Lisa Lisa looked right at Mum. "Mama Erina, we have a question for you. We've spoken to the fisherman that rescued the two of us. They said they found us 100 km south east of La Palma, floating in a big black box that looked like a coffin."

Ehhhh? A coffin? Antonio Torres had called me the white raft, but it was actually a black coffin?

Lisa Lisa glanced at me quickly, then continued. "It was big enough to fit a full grown man. There were cushions on the inside, and it was designed to shield the occupant from external blows. It sounds a little excessive for a coffin, but that's what the fisherman all called it. Was it a coffin, Mama Erina?"

I looked at Mum, and she seemed to be gritting her teeth against some pain. She stared grimly back at Lisa Lisa, but didn't answer.

"The fisherman also said that when you stepped out of your coffin raft, you had a baby, me, and something else, in a bundle made from fabric torn off the hem of your dress. They said you clutched it closely to you...and that it was about the size of a human head."

...the size of a head? Then Lisa Lisa thought it *was* a head?

"You didn't bring Dio Brando's head to the Canary Islands, did you, Mama Erina?" Lisa Lisa asked. "You wouldn't have left Jorge's father's body on the sinking ship, and brought a vampire's head with you, shielding it from the sunlight? Right?"

There was a harsh gleam in her eye. This was what she'd meant by **thorough**. They were not even planning on showing mercy to family. But that question crossed the line.

"Mum would never leave Dad behind! Lisa Lisa, you're being ridiculous!" I said.

But Lisa Lisa never took her eyes off Mum.

Why wasn't Mum saying anything? She could silence Lisa Lisa with a word! My desire to defend her was slowly giving way to anxiety.

At last she broke her silence.

"That...was not Dio Brando's head."

Thank goodness! Of course it wouldn't be, stupid Lisa Lisa. I was about to yell at her when Mum spoke again.

"That was the head of my husband, Jonathan Joestar."

For the first time in my life I was scared of my Mum.

Chapter 4
Moriōh
杜王町

To get from Nishiakatsuki to Morioh in the middle of the day took a good six hours, even using planes, trains, and buses in the most efficient combination available. By car, it was about 650 kilometers, which would take roughly the same amount of time. I was told of Tsukumojuku's death at 6:30 AM, so Tsukumojuku must have headed there shortly after I left him at the hospital. Either he'd been pretending not to be interested or he'd found some reason to care after I left. That, or someone else had taken him to Morioh to kill him, or after killing him. Although the corpse of a sixteen-year-old boy wasn't exactly easy to transport.

How he got there wasn't the only problem. The body of a sixteen-year-old male wasn't small, and Tsukumojuku's body had remained largely intact.

His throat had been slit so deep that only a single layer of skin kept his head attached. He was found naked, wrapped only in a red, diamond-shaped cloth. There was a broadaxe slung over his shoulder, and he was found mounted on a bear. Obviously, the scene was arranged to look like something out of the folk tale *Kintaro*. Ever since I left Fukui the lyrics to the Kintaro children's song had been on an endless loop in my head. This was completely inappropriate, of course. The killer didn't arrange the scene like this as a joke. I think.

I got off the train at Morioh Station shortly after 1 PM, and looked over the map of the town posted just outside the station gates. *Deja vu*. Had I been here before?

I was sure I hadn't. Touhoku had the famous Namahage Detective, and he pretty much handled all the cases that required someone like him, so I'd never been called up here. In elementary school we went to Nara and Kyoto, and in Junior High we went to Tokyo, so this was my first trip up north.

There were no tall buildings anywhere around the station, but there was a lot of foot traffic, and rows of nicely turned out shops and cafes. It was both peaceful and lively. The city had been well-planned; there were no telephone poles in sight, and plenty of rooms for pedestrians and cars. There was a car stumping for the upcoming election in the roundabout by the station, but they kept the speaker volume to a respectable level. "Kumotaku, Morioh's son. Kumotaku, star of the north. Kumoi Takumi asks for your vote." I was hungry, so I stopped at a restaurant near the station and had the Miso Tongue Meal – a local delicacy, apparently. It was good. Beef Tongue is both thicker and softer than I'd imagined, Tsukumojuku. May you rest in peace. When I finished eating, I took stock of my emotional state. I'd only known Tsukumojuku a few hours, since I'd witnessed his entrance into our world, and was basically the only person alive he knew. There'd been nobody else to report his death to, and I was basically here to bury him. In light of this I decided *not* to try the sweet sesame dumplings the stall near station was hell bent on convincing tourists to buy. I hailed a taxi, and headed for the Arrow Cross House, where my strange visitor's body had been found. Morioh was in a gentle valley, and once we left the shopping area, we passed through a residential area and soon found ourselves in farmland. The road led through fields towards the sea. As we neared the water, round hills grew more common, and this topography continued into the water; there were a great number of tiny islands dotting the shallow sea. For a moment they looked like a group of umibozu peeking out of the water; it was quite striking. And tourism friendly, as the tour boats sailing in and out of the harbor demonstrated. There were a number of souvenir shops, inns, and restaurants lining the docks.

The Arrow Cross House stood on top of a round hill – the biggest hill around, and the closest to the water -- with a fantastic view of the sea and the harbor. White walls and a flat roof framed

against the blue sky, making it look like a dainty little museum. As my taxi reached the top of the hill, I saw the building's owner standing outside. He was a manga artist named Kishibe Rohan.

He was supposedly in his thirties, but to my surprise, he looked barely out of his teens. I don't read a lot of manga, and had never read anything by him, but I knew the name. The *Pink Dark Boy* series had been running for twenty years, and had recently started part eight. I got out of the taxi, said hello, and apologized for not being familiar with his work.

"Then let me show you my art," he said, and his finger went fwipfwipfwip through the air in front of my eyes, sketching a mysterious boy in a broad-brimmed hat. Not only was I able to make out what he was drawing in the air, I was apparently so impressed with the quality of his art it felt like I'd been struck by lightning fttzzz and froze to the spot, unable to move. I think I even passed out for a moment.

I don't know if this surprised him or disappointed him, but he gave me a dubious frown, and then said, "I'll show you around the Arrow Cross. I purchased it quite recently, and I've only lived here six months. Of all the rotten luck! Here I was, happy to have acquired a bizarre building, and it gets used for a murder. What a cliché! I suppose I'll have to turn it into something worthwhile, but I can't just write the details of a real case into my manga. Or should I be more concerned about finding a place to stay? Until the case is solved?"

He spoke very quickly, and frequently changed subjects; clearly conversing with him was going to be a workout.

"I doubt it; it's a big enough house you won't necessarily need to use the room where the body was found, and there seem to be plenty of entrances."

"I see! Good. I suppose both Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen both show everyone living normally in the house after a

murder. Even though staying together just leads to more murders. I always assumed that was forced by the needs of the plot, and would never happen in real life, but I suppose we all believe that one murder is enough to end things, and nothing bad will ever happen to us. And it is such a pain to find a new place to live. Even now someone's been murdered, I find myself quite grateful I can keep living here."

In my line of work, I've known plenty of people who thought like this, and then got murdered. I decided not to mention it. Our feet scrunching on the gravel, we did a circuit of the building. There were no bushes or flower beds, but with this view, they hardly seemed necessary. "This is a spectacular view, Kishibe-san. With a view like this at home, I can see why you wouldn't want to switch to some dumpy hotel."

Below us you could see the white sands of Morioh Pearl Beach, and countless tiny islands out in Morioh Harbor.

Kishibe glared at me, muttering, "Kishibe-san?" several times. Crap, did I get his name wrong? It was Kishibe Rohan, right? "Nobody calls me Kishibe-san," he said, at last.

"Pardon me. Kishibe-sensei," I said, hastily.

"Noooo! That's not what I mean!" he exploded. "There's no need to call me sensei whatsoever! I shudder at the very thought that someone might think I wanted *that*! I'm simply not at all used to being addressed by my family name. My editors, readers, and even the bank clerks down in town all call me Rohan!"

Whew, manga artists sure were eccentric. I guess? What he was saying wasn't that out there, but the over-the-top eruption of emotions certainly made him one to watch out for. "Um, but..."

"No buts allowed!" Kishibe-sensei? san? screamed, and went fwipfwipfwipfwip with his fingers again, drawing that boy, and fffzzz once again I was super impressed. Had I become a huge fan of his this quickly, or did Rohan's art have some sort of special

power...eh?

"Rohan?"

"You can no longer call me anything but Rohan."

"Rohan...hunh? Ro...guh...?"

The word refused to come out. I was trying to address him by his family name, but only his given name would come out. What was this? This was weird, right? Was something wrong with me?

Rohan turned and grinned at me. "Guhh? Please. It is but a small change. Pray, don't worry about it. You're here to solve this murder! Do your job. I have my own job to do, and until the Arrow Cross Case is solved, I will be forever preoccupied with police interviews and people investigating the scene. Like I'm made of time!"

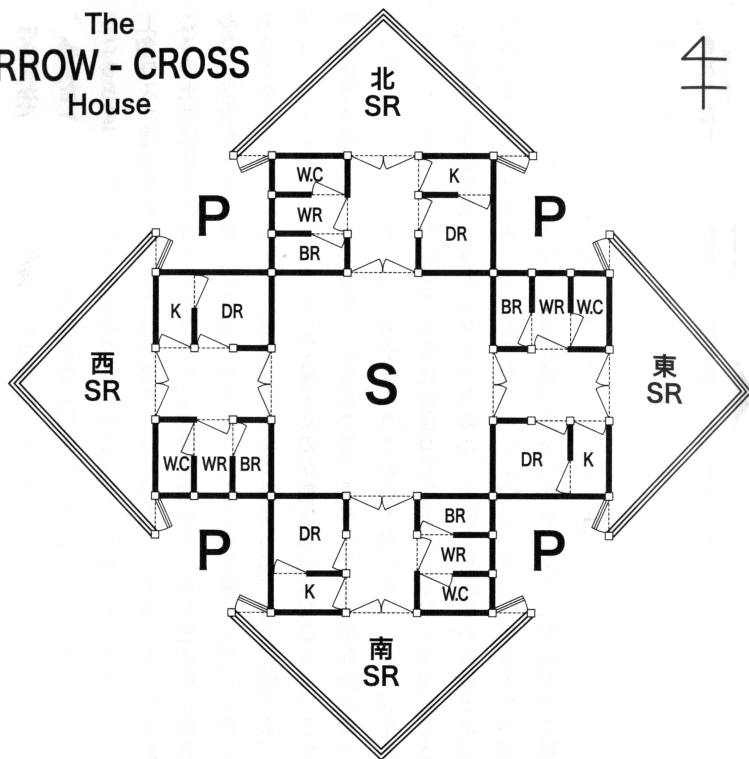
Change? What did he mean? **Don't worry about it?** So he did do something to me? What?

He'd just draw a sketch in the air and made me go fffftzzz. But...not just that. He'd done something else, something that changed me. What did that mean?

This was very strange. Something bizarre was happening, something I didn't yet understand. I'd have to be on my guard around Rohan.

Like the name Arrow Cross House implies, the building was shaped like a cross, with each point shaped like an arrow. There was no dedicated front door; each of the arrows had two doors, and any of the eight could be used to get inside.

The
ARROW - CROSS
 House



- SR ... Sun Room (サンルーム)
- BR ... Bath Room (風呂)
- W.C ... Water Closet (トイレ)
- WR ... Wash Room (洗面所)
- K ... Kitchen (キッチン)
- DR ... Dining Room (ダイニング)
- P ... Patio (中庭)
- S ... Study (書斎)

"The Arrow Cross is a strange sort of house," Rohan said. "It appeared five years ago, without any of the neighbors noticing the construction. Despite the size of it. For three years before that a different house stood here – so to build this one they would have had to knock the old one down, or at the least, remodel it considerably. But no permits were ever filed. Furthermore, this house is clearly visible from the harbor, and anyone glancing upwards would have seen people working on it. Yet somehow the Arrow Cross was built without anyone noticing. This is quite a mystery, wouldn't you say? Not only were there no permits for construction, there is no record of sale for the land. It was officially owned by the city of Morioh, and construction was done illegally. They spent some time attempting to locate the owner, but when they gave up and decided to tear it down I stepped in and offered to purchase it. My previous residence had just burned down, you see. This place is perfect. It's quiet here, and the house itself is fascinating – I love not knowing who built it or why. Now, the house that stood here before this one was a very simple square building. But it was also bizarre – it had no windows or doors. No visible entrance at all. Heh heh heh heh. I'm sure there was an entrance hidden somewhere; after all, if there was a sunroof or whatever you'd never know from downhill. Although that does beg the question of why they'd wish to obscure such a glorious view. At any rate, that square house – the neighbors called it the Cube House – supposedly was moved here from a town called Nishi Akatsuki, in Fukui. How that rumor got around without anyone having any idea who owned the house, nobody knows."

"Eh? Nishi Akatsuki? That's where I'm from."

"I know?" Rohan purred.

I know? How did he know? It was the police who had called me to let me know Tsukumojuku was dead, and when I'd called Rohan, I'd had no reason to mention my current address. I suppose

he could have heard my name on the news, but I was a minor, and had already had death threats from several psychos, so the most specific information available given about me was always 'from Fukui.' Or did Rohan have connections with the police or those in power that could get him that kind of information this quickly?

Whatever. I was more concerned with what the fact that Tsukumojuku had been murdered here, in a house that had been transported from Nishi Akatsuki, actually meant.

"Did you know there's been more than one detective murdered in this town?" Rohan suddenly asked.

"More than one? Really?"

"I suppose you wouldn't know. The first one happened in the middle of the night. The news has only just started talking about it. You wouldn't have had much chance to watch TV on your way here, either. Tell me, was that boy...the one killed in my Arrow Cross...was he a detective, too?"

He had said he was. "Yes. Although he was from far away, and what cases he handled..." I knew perfectly well. He'd solved fifteen locked room murders. In 1904, in the Canary Islands, in another world. But bringing that up here would just confuse things. "...I'm not sure. But he was definitely a detective."

"I see. So then he is one of the Serial Detective Murders."

"Who...who else was killed?"

"...? Do detectives all know each other? If it might come as a blow to you, perhaps we should step inside and let you sit down first?"

"I'll be fine. The only detective I've met is Tsukumojuku."

"Oh, in that case, a man named Hakkyoku Sachiari, and a girl with a very strange name, Nekoneko Nyan Nyan Nyan."

I'd heard of both. They were both Tokyo detectives. We stood outside one of Arrow Cross's doors, and Rohan told me how Hakkyoku had been found across Morioh Harbor, at Boingy Cape,

seated on a giant stuffed sea turtle. Nekoneko had been found in town, near a strange-shaped stone called Angelo Rock, surrounded by stuffed dogs, cats, and pheasants. Hakkyoku had died of alcohol poisoning; a large quantity of sake had been injected into his blood stream. Nekoneko had suffocated from the massive quantity of dumplings jammed down her throat.

They'd clearly been made to look like Urashima Taro and Momotaro.

While Tsukumojuku was Kintaro.

A serial killer killing detectives? That meant I might be targeted, too.

"Let me show you to the scene. The forensics people have been and gone. I've looked it over thoroughly myself, but didn't touch anything." Rohan took me through a door on the east side of the Arrow Cross. Inside was a large triangular sunroom, with large bay windows on both exterior sides and the ceiling. The walls and floor were all painted white. It was very bright. All the furniture was in exquisite taste, and were it not for the bed in the middle, you could easily mistake it for a furniture store, or an unusually elegant manga shop. There were books on the tables, shelves, and floor, but not the books of photographs or other decorative books you'd see in furniture stores. They were all manga. "Feel free to keep your shoes on anywhere in the house. This is the east sunroom, which I use as a bedroom," Rohan said, leading me out into a carpeted hallway. It had no windows, so the moment the door to the sunroom closed it seemed very dark indeed. I had the silhouette of the bed and cabinets burned into my eyes, and had to blink furiously the whole length of the hall. Doors to either side led to the bathroom and toilet. At the end of the hall was a large square room at the center of the Arrow Cross House. Every house

I'd ever been to used large open rooms like this as a place to entertain company, but not this one. "This is where I work," Rohan said, leading me in. It was at least twice the size of the sunroom; windowless, dark, and gloomy, with nothing in it but a single tiny desk perched right in the middle. There were pens and ink on the desk, arranged in neat rows. The walls were bare, with only the doors leading to the other arrows breaking the monotony. The only lights came from the chandelier on the ceiling, and the smaller lamp on the desk. "With such a great view, aren't you tempted to work in one of the sunrooms?" I asked. "Not at all," Rohan snorted. "Much too bright, and my work requires no view." Okay, then. I could swear he'd grumbled about the Cube House wasting the view, but whatever. Rohan led me across his study, down another hall, and into the north sunroom. The scene of the crime. The light hit my eyes, which felt like they'd been slapped by the soft hands of a child. It had seemed bright when I entered his bedroom, but now it actively hurt. Walking through the dark halls and work room hadn't helped, but there was also nothing in this sunroom...except for the giant bear. The bear's brown fur and the blood stains on its back and the floor – Tsukumojuku's blood, presumably – were almost a relief in the sea of white. I looked over what was left of the Kintaro display, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light.

"I don't use either this room or the southern one. This one gets too cold in winter and the south one gets too hot in summer. I only need a bedroom and a work room to begin with. At most, a guest room for editors to stay in when they come to see the sights," Rohan said, shielding his eyes from the light. "The murder itself doesn't bother me, but I'd like to clean the place. The police won't let me. Have to keep the scene intact, they say."

"....."

"The police took your friend's body and the axe with them.

The bear was so big they left it here, but they'll be back for it eventually. Yesterday and last night they found two other dead detectives, and then this morning a third, your friend. They're rather busy. They're forming a special team to deal with things. I had them leave a copy of the crime scene photographs and the forensic data, if you'd like to see it?"

He had them leave it? What led to this...arrogant streak? It didn't seem to be just a personality thing. It was like he'd gotten used to the world bending to his will. I did want to see the photographs, though.

Rohan brought a notebook computer, rested it on his arm, and showed me the screen. I took a closer look. Tsukumojuku's handsome visage was ashen. He was seated on the bear's back, and both his body and the axe were wrapped in wire, fixing them in place. He was leaning slightly to the right, I think; his head was tilted in that direction, leaving the gaping wound on display to his left.

I could tell Rohan was studying my reaction to these images, but it didn't bother me. He didn't mean to be insensitive. He simply wasn't aware how transparent his expressions and body language were. We may not have known each other long, but it was already clear that Rohan was an odd bird, but not a bad one.

"Notice anything, detective?" he asked, with a mocking lilt. Then again, he always sounded like that, so I didn't take offense.

"From the state of his body, nothing of note."

"Oh? Nothing about the Kintaro thing? The others are Urashima Taro, and Momotaro, of course."

"True. I don't suppose you have pictures of those crime scenes, too?"

"I do. Impressive deduction, detective! I suppose." Rohan quickly opened more images on the screen. "But why would the killer pose them like this? It's hardly a professional opinion, but it

seems like rather a lot of work. Gathering all the stuffed animals, decorating them, even matching the method of murder to the theme."

"If you had the bear already, then the dogs, monkeys, and pheasants would be easy to get. Even the sea turtle must not be that hard to find in a port town like this. But getting a stuffed bear is quick tricky. There are no bears around here – that's why they had to use a polar bear, and finding the polar bear was likely the inspiration for the whole stunt."

"...eh? Polar bear? This is a polar bear?" Rohan asked.

"? You didn't notice? Small head, long neck – it's obvious. *Ursus maritimus*, the polar bear."

The scientific name was given by John Phipps in 1774.

"Hunh...that should narrow down the owner, then. Even more than owning a normal stuffed bear."

"Mm? But...this is your bear, isn't it?"

"Heavens, no. There are no polar bears in my manga. If there was, I...might consider buying one, but more likely I'd just go to the zoo, or find some place with a stuffed one on display. No need to own it personally. Do they even sell stuffed polar bears anywhere?"

"The Washington Convention doesn't specifically forbid the sale of them; polar bears are listed in Appendix II. That means it's up to the country of origin whether to grant permission to export them. There were plenty available before the convention existed, so I'd imagine they're obtainable if one desires. But you didn't buy one, Rohan?"

"Noooo. Decorating with animal corpses is *not* my style."

"...I see. But getting a stuffed animal this size into your house would be very difficult. It would take several people."

"I'd have noticed."

"The murder happened late last night or early this morning. Did you go out at all?"

"Of course not. I was drawing until two AM, then slept until just before dawn. I usually sleep until sunrise, but I woke a little early this morning."

"Dawn...it starts getting light around five AM this time of year."

"Sunrise yesterday was at 5:18 AM. I sleep in a sunroom. Early rising is inevitable. I've never really needed a great quantity of sleep. Three hours is plenty."

"Hmm...I've heard manga artists are always busy. By the same token, I don't suppose you were so exhausted you would have fallen into such a deep sleep you could have failed to notice a group of intruders?"

It seemed unlikely, but was worth verifying.

"No, no. It may come as a surprise to you, but I'm quite high strung. I'm not saying I'd wake at a pin drop, but I can't see how someone bringing a giant stuffed animal in would escape my notice."

How could that possibly be a surprise to me? He might as well have it written on his shirt.

"But if they put it on a cart or something, and moved it quietly into the house?"

"Quietly depends on how quietly. I like to work in silence, and there are sound absorption panels everywhere. If they were moving it from one room to another, it's possible I wouldn't notice. But from outside, no normal human could ever do it. You walked around the house with me. Arrow Cross is surrounded by gravel. As an anti-theft mechanism. No normal human could cross it without making a sound. Anyone delivering a bear would have made a tremendous racket. Last night I certainly may have been more

exhausted than usual. After all, I somehow managed to pick the wrong bedroom. The difference in the morning sky was what woke me early."

"The wrong bedroom?"

"Yes. My bedroom is the east sunroom, the room we came in by. But this morning I was sleeping in the west sunroom."

"? How could that happen? You work in the center room, and your desk is right in the center of it, right?"

"Yes."

"Your desk faces north, so south is behind you, and east and west are to the right and left. Simple. You've been living here for six months, it hardly seems likely you walked the wrong direction."

"But apparently I did. I like to keep things orderly, you see. I cannot bear things that aren't symmetrical. That's part of the reason I purchased the Arrow Cross. The east and west sunrooms have exactly the same furniture, arranged in exactly the same way. Beautiful symmetry is always a product of human ingenuity. Symmetry is the basis of man-made beauty."

Hmph. "We're talking point symmetry rather than line symmetry, then?"

"Mm? No, line symmetry. The rooms are mirror images of each other."

"Then something even stranger is happening here. The placement of furniture in the two rooms is reversed; you'd notice the moment you opened the door. Yet you fell asleep without noticing?"

"...er, um...hmm."

"Did you get in bed without turning on the light?"

"No, I turned it on, got in bed, and pressed the switch near my pillow."

"Do you drink much?"

"I ingest nothing after nine PM. And I may have a drink on occasion, but never to excess."

"....."

"I guess these mistakes just happen. After all, I'm not the only one who made this mistake last night."

"Someone else did? Who?"

"My guest. I'm letting her stay here for the time being."

"...so there was someone else here last night with you? Mind telling me more?"

"I'll introduce you, of course. But please don't mention her to anyone else. She's still in high school. If word got around she was staying at the home of an older bachelor, well...that would be a shame, wouldn't it? She has her reasons."

"Like?"

"She remembers nothing but her name. Amnesia. So severe even I can't read her past. So I have her help look after the place while she tries to uncover her past, and waits for her memories to return."

"Heh...you didn't know her before?"

"Not in the least. She's maybe a little older than you. Showed up shortly after I moved here. I never imagined myself capable of living with anyone, but I couldn't just throw her out on the streets, and she seemed like a nice girl. We're getting along well."

"What's her name?"

"Sugimoto Reimi."

"So she made the same mistake as you, and got the wrong bedroom?"

This seemed like a fun way to live. Rohan seemed quietly happy about it, too.

"Yes. She was in my bed, and I was in the bed I'm loaning to her. So awkward. She made the mistake first, but that's no excuse

for jumping into hers. At least I wasn't snoring next to her. At any rate, the light woke me up; it was on the wrong side of the sky, and hit my eyes the wrong way. I jumped up, went to my room, knocked on the door. She woke up, I explained the situation through the door, and then moved away so she could get back to her own room. Since she had to cross the work room to get there, I went into the north sunroom. That's when I found Tsukumojuku's body."

"Hmm..." From romantic comedy hijinks to grisly murder.

"I suppose the simplistic layout and lack of furniture make such accidents possible," Rohan continued. "I wasn't drunk, and I'm such a light sleeper the difference in the morning light was enough to wake me. So I don't see how it's possible I could have slept through someone carrying a stuffed polar bear into the house."

"There's no need to think about that any more," I said.

"Hunh?" Rohan blinked at me. This room mix-up was bothering me. Why would that happen? To both at once?

This meant something. But I didn't know what, yet.

"So why is there a polar bear here?" Rohan asked.

This, I knew. "The stuffed polar bear was not brought into the house at the same time as Tsukumojuku's body. It was already in the house, probably in this very room."

"What? Here? This gigantic stuffed animal?" Rohan waved at it. It was two and a half meters long. If it had been standing it would easily have topped three. "Since when?"

"Have you gone on any trips since you moved into the house?"

"No. Not because my work schedule keeps me here. I simply had no place I needed to research."

I didn't care. "So you were working at home every day, which means it would be quite difficult to guess when you'd go

out. Odds are this polar bear has been here since before you moved in."

"Hmm? Since I bought the place?"

"Yes."

"Then how do explain me living here without ever seeing it? Do you take me for a blind man?"

"Rohan, it's almost evening. Before the sun goes down, let's try an experiment."

"Yes! Let's!"

"But first, let me ask...do you want this stuffed animal?"

"Not at all!"

"I asked because you are technically the owner. Now, where is your washroom?"

"What? Why?"

"I need to borrow your hair clippers."

The top of Rohan's head was nicely styled, but he wore a strange jagged headband, and the hair beneath that was neatly trimmed.

This did not seem like a hairstyle you would ask for at a hair salon, so I was sure he maintained it himself. I was right; he took me to a washroom and handed over a pair of clippers. I also borrowed a broom, dustpan, and a towel.

"I'll have you know I'm not a fan of loaning such things to other people! Like I said, I'm very high strung!"

"I'm not using them personally," I said. We went back to the sunroom, and I began cutting the polar bear's hair, removing the bits covered in brown paint. Vvvvvvvvvrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

"Aaaaaaugh! Now I can never use those clippers again! I hope you'll be paying for those? Augh! Augh! I'll send you a bill! Seriously! Aaaaaaugh!"

I brushed Rohan aside. "Please, you're being distracting. Why don't you go call Sugimoto? I'd like to meet her, hear her side

of things. Wait in your work room till I call you."

"Tch...you're not going to be rude to her, are you? I won't stand for it!" he muttered, and left. I concentrating on shaving the bear. Eventually it looked like a polar bear again. Good.

I swept the hair into the dustpan, but there wasn't even a trashcan in the room, so I just had to leave it in the corner. I wiped the floor with a towel. I went to wash the towel off, and on my way to the washroom, I found Rohan peeping in the door from the work room.

"Just a few more minutes."

"Ahhh, you even wiped up the blood? Don't look at me when they yell at you for destroying the scene!"

"Yes, yes, don't worry about that."

With the blood gone, the sunroom floor was bright white again. Good. I put the towel down by the dustpan, and left the sunroom to get Rohan. He was alone in the dark work room. Was Sugimoto out? No matter. "The experiment is ready. Come on in."

Rohan was seated on the corner of his desk, and he jumped up and trotted over. "So? We're experimenting with my supposed blindness?"

"Yes."

".....! Did you hide the polar bear somewhere?"

"No. I'm just checking to see how blind you are."

"What do..." he started, but as the door swung open, his words trailed off. ".....hunh?? The bear...? It's here?"

I thought so.

He couldn't see it. The bear had its back to Rohan.

I explained.

"Polar bears have evolved to enable them to hunt in snow. Their hairs are hollow. The hollow serves to scatter the bright

northern light, making their entire bodies glow white, and preventing their prey from seeing them approach. Their bodies cast no shadow. This also allows the light to reach their bodies directly, and warm them. Rohan, right now you are a seal in a snowfield being stalked by this bear. In this white room, with sunlight streaming through these massive windows, and the white gravel and white sand beach outside the room, the polar bear's hairs scatter the light just enough to trick your eyes as you enter from that dark work room."

"Nyanyanyanonono!"

Rohan reacted to my deduction injection with such a bizarre noise that I burst out laughing. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

This was no time for laughter. This wasn't a trick the killer had intentionally prepared. "You were so busy working since you moved in that you put nothing in this north sunroom, and almost never came in here, and even if you did were blinded by the sunlight and never saw the bear. But it was always here. And it's in a glass room, so at other times of day or other angles...anyone doing anything but peeking through the door after working in a dark room would have seen the polar bear. The girl you live with never imagined you hadn't seen it, and never thought to bring it up in conversation, but she knew it was there. Tsukumojuku's killer saw it too. That's why it occurred to him to use it in his Kintaro display. You see, that was the start, Rohan. That's what gave him the idea."

"But this is the third murder?"

"He simply chose to use it later in his spree. But because he had the bear, he knew he could pull off Kintaro; because he could do Kintaro he decided to do Urashima Taro and Momotaro. Based on the difficulty of each display, that must be how he arrived at the plan."

"....."

"Now, Rohan. Kintaro, Urashima Taro, and Momotaro. The three famous Taros. All famous folk tales. Will there be more murders? There are plenty of other folk tales, so why pick three with characters named Taro?"

"I have no idea."

"There must be a meaning. But the three famous ones are already used. Do you know any other folk tales with Taros?"

"Gegege?"

"But that's not a folk tale, and the anime song isn't a children's song."

"Then Obake Q is out of the running as well."

"Indeed."

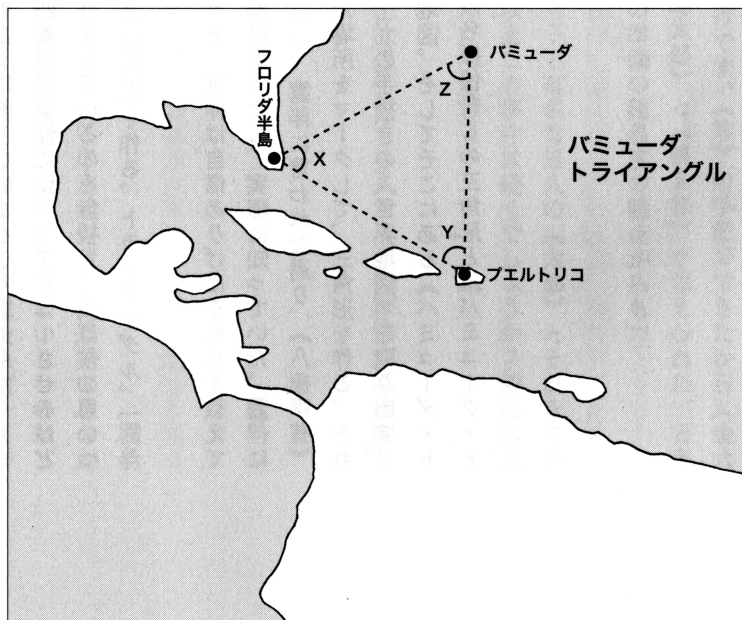
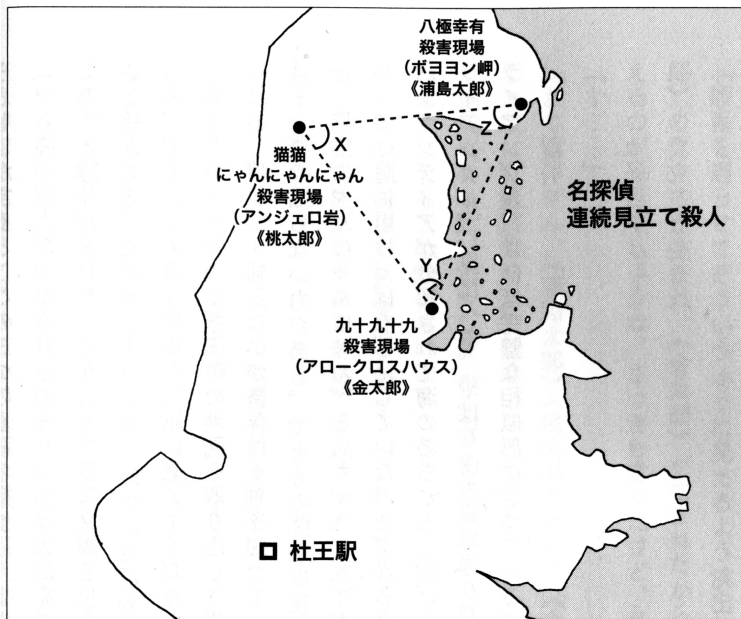
"I can't think of anything else."

"Neither can I. Perhaps there are local legends about somethingsomething Taros here and there across Japan, and songs about them, but this type of display holds no meaning if the people viewing the display don't get it. Occasionally you'll get a killer doing it for the art or something, but in that case, these three are too simplistic. If there were a fourth murder, the display would have to be based on a legend so much less famous it wouldn't fit. I think we can probably assume that this serial detective killing has ended at three."

"If I was the killer, I would reveal an original Taro for the fourth murder," Rohan said. Mere distractions. I ignored him, and reviewed my theory. Three cases. Three points. That made a triangle. "Rohan, can you show me the exact locations of the other cases?"

I took out the map I'd procured at the station, and Rohan confidently pointed them out. I wasn't sure how Rohan had come by this information, but he had it. Rohan...had some power I did not yet understand. But I could deal with that later. I marked the locations where Hakkyoku Sachiari, Nekoneko Nyan Nyan Nyan,

and Tsukumojuku were found, and drew a triangle. Then I took out the hand drawn map of the world Tsukumojuku had made. The world filled with oceans, pieces of Panlandia scattered across it. I compared it with the Bermuda Triangle he'd described. I was right. The triangle of dead detectives matched the shape of the Bermuda Triangle exactly.



Tsukumojuku traveled through time via this triangle. What could that symbol mean here?

"...what is that strange map?" Rohan asked. "It's a map of the world, isn't it? I see Japan. In the strangest place. The whole world's been scrambled."

"This is a map Tsukumojuku drew for me before he died."

"It looked like you were comparing the triangle drawn on that map with the triangle formed by these three murders. Do you think there's some connection to that fictional map?"

"....."

"Not everything has meaning. Moments of synchronicity seem so bizarre our minds naturally attempt to extract meaning from them – meaning that isn't there."

I looked up, and met Rohan's eye.

"I disagree. There's a important, inflexible law that defines the world."

".....?"

"Everything has meaning. Nothing is out of place."

"Hmph. That's only true in mystery novels."

"But I'm a detective. The moment I get involved, the rules of the world shift to my genre."

"...such confidence. Or possibly madness. So this is a mystery novel, then? Hmm. Then let me say this – if I'm involved as well, if this is happening here in Morioh – then no one set of rules can define anything. The very laws of physics are distorted beyond recognition here."

".....?" In Morioh? What did that mean? Rohan was clearly hinting at the mysterious power he seemed to have, but was there something specific to Morioh that caused it? Or were there other people with powers like his here? "Rohan...you have a...a power of some kind, right?"

"Mr. Joestar, you realize that Arrow Cross and the room in

which Tsukumojuuku was found technically form a locked room?" Rohan asked, ignoring my question.

"Eh? What's that got..." What point was there to the room being locked? The state of Tsukumojuuku's body made it perfectly clear he'd been murdered, the body was carefully posed, and it was the third case. In no way would it be mistaken for suicide.

"Being a locked room means nothing, here." Rohan said. So he hadn't ignored my question.

"...because the laws of physics don't apply?"

"Exactly. There are a fair number of people in this town who could kill Tsukumojuuku from a distance, and create the locked room."

".....? Could you do that?"

"Yes. I could have Tsukumojuuku himself lock the room, paint the bear white, strip, wrap that triangle around himself, climb on a bear, and cut his own head off with an axe. Of course, I would do no such thing."

"You can make people do things? Like hypnotism?"

"Very similar. But much less ceremony, and much harder to resist."

".....so....." I hesitated, then decided to say it. "This is a super power? It this a town of people with super powers?"

"We call these powers Stands. The main difference from typical comic book super powers is that each Stand has a visible form. It may look like a person, an animal, an insect, a boat or a car, a fishing rod or a key. But because these images appear to stand beside their users, we call them Stands. And Stand Masters find themselves drawn to one another, like a magnetic attraction. Morioh is just one such pole."

I shuddered, at a loss for words.

Super powers?

I had to solve a case in a world where they existed? It was

too late to back out now. I was already part of this. Everything I'd known went flying out the window when Tsukumojuku appeared.

Everything had meaning. Nothing is out of place. I repeated my own proclamation like a mantra. I had to make my deductions with this new information in mind, and if I was truly a detective, I would be able to pull that off.

"Speaking of strange laws of physics," Rohan said. I knew I didn't want to hear this, but that I had to. I needed to know everything.

"What?"

"This morning, when I woke up in the west sunroom after accidentally sleeping there, I looked at the north sunroom."

"....."

"Those big windows are perfectly parallel, and the doors at the back of the arrows are also made of glass, so I had a good view of the inside of the north sunroom. The polar bear is quite tall, and if Tsukumojuku's body had been on its back, I would certainly have seen it."

"....uh."

"I couldn't see it at all, Mr. Joestar," Rohan seemed to pity me. "When I woke up, the polar bear and Tsukumojuku's body were not in the sunroom. The sun had not yet risen, and the sky behind the north sunroom was a dull orange. The polar bear's hairs would not have had enough light to reflect to make it invisible. I'm certain of it. There was no Kintaro display in that sunroom when I woke. I'm afraid your theory that the polar bear was always in that room doesn't hold water."

".....!"

"After my coincidental glance at the north sunroom, I got out of bed, crossed to the east sunroom, spoke a word or two to Sugimoto, went to the north sunroom, and found the Kintaro

display. In other words, during the couple of minutes...no, one minute that I was inside, the killer would have had to murder Tsukumojuku, move the bear in, arrange the display, and escape from the locked room. All without being seen by me on my way to the sunroom, and without stepping on any of the gravel that surrounds the house. I think it's clear this was not the doing of any normal human, no matter how crafty."

"...it certainly seems that way."

"I don't mean to frighten you, but three other detectives have already been murdered. You should consider your own safety. You appear to be a skilled detective, but I doubt there's anything someone without a Stand could do here."

Was that true?

"If everything has meaning, then my coming here means something, Rohan," I said. "I have a role to play here – that much is certain. Rohan, could you tell me more about these Stands?"

"People like us never share the details of our powers with others."

"....."

"But for some reason I find myself drawn to you. Don't misunderstand me! I'm speaking of the magnetism I mentioned earlier. For some reason I find myself convinced our meeting isn't a coincidence."

"Naturally," I said. "I was more or less summoned here. Invited...by means of a threat. Rohan, do you know...um...hunh?"

What? I couldn't finish the sentence. I had known the name a moment ago, but now it wouldn't come out. I had wanted to ask if he knew the name.

"Mm? What?"

"Sorry. I was going to ask if you knew a name, but suddenly I can't remember it." I was a detective. This never happened. It could never happen. Had I simply forgotten? No, that couldn't be.

My memory never failed me. Rohan was staring at me in silence.

"Did you do something to me?"

He nodded. "Yes. If you say that name aloud, you'll die."

".....?" What? **If Jorge Joestar ever comes to Morioh, I'll kill him.** Was Rohan making that same threat?"

What had Rohan done to me? Stolen my memories? No. Rohan had also forced me to call him Rohan. His power was similar to hypnotism...so he was controlling me. Making me forget that name. What kind of power would make that possible?

"Then you do know that name, Rohan?"

"I know the name. Not his face."

"Can you tell me?"

"No. Speaking his name means death. You explode."

"Hunh?" Explode? "What do you mean?"

"Your body is blown away. Fire and shockwaves. Everything turns to ash, down to your hair and fingernails, until there's no trace of you left."

".....? You're killed by a bomb of something?" But what kind of bomb could demolish the body that thoroughly?

"...your entire body is the bomb."

"? ...what do you –" ...mean? Before I could finish, the doorbell rang.

It made a noise like a phony violin, and took me several second to work out it was a doorbell at all.

"Oh, they're back," Rohan said. His eyes went dead. What was wrong with him? I wondered. "Sorry," he said. "But could you get them to leave? I know them well enough, but lately they've been ignoring me. Very vexing."

Ignoring him? "Um...you should really handle that yourself." I wasn't here to mediate childish squabbles.

"Come on, you're a detective! Running off people who interfere with the investigation is part of your job description.

They'll definitely get in the way, I promise."

"How do you know them?" I asked, looking. Three boys, in school uniforms. They looked to be about my age. They were walking around the house, moving towards us. Two of them looked like thugs. I could see why he'd want to avoid them. "They're kids. You sure they aren't your fans?"

"They aren't fans! Just a pain in my ass! Every time they show up they bring trouble with them! I'm going back to my workroom. You get rid of them."

Rohan turned, and basically fled the north sunroom. But as he opened the door, he paused, and said, "You too, Sugimoto."

I turned to look, but only Rohan went through that door.

My head was swimming. Stands. A murder display and a locked room made in one minute. A name hidden from my memory. Rohan's odd behavior. **Speaking his name means death. You explode.** This strange building, and the strange events inside. The Arrow Cross House and the Cube House. There was even a girl with amnesia, Sugimoto Reimi. Rohan was a little weird about her. **You too, Sugimoto.** He'd been speaking to empty air. As if there was a girl standing there...? I opened the door, and stepped outside. I had to get the facts.

When the three boys saw me coming out of the Arrow Cross, they moved into an attack pattern, placing themselves on all three sides. The two thugs had the same face, and were probably twins; one went to my right, and the other to the left. The boy in front of me looked like a nice kid; he didn't look like the sort who'd be friends with the other two. He waved, smiling.

"Hello!"

I bowed. "Good afternoon."

"There was a murder here today, but we saw you in the

window, and came to check it out," he said. He was smiling, but also watching me carefully.

"Let me introduce myself," I said. "My name is Jorge Joestar. I may be only sixteen, but I'm a detective."

"Sixteen? So are we. A detective? But you shouldn't be in a place like this alone. After all, the one murdered here was a detective, too."

"Yes, I knew him."

"Oh! I see. My condolences. So you came to investigate?"

"Exactly. You are...?"

"...friends of the owner, Rohan-sensei!"

And he told me to run you off. "I see. Well, sorry if I spooked ya, but Rohan gave me permission to be here, so..."

"Rohan did whaaaat!?" the thug on my right snarled. "Don't you fuckin' lie to me!" Interestingly, he made no attempt to get in my face, the way most thugs would. He had his hands in his pockets, and was standing a good three meters away. His body language made it clear he was ready to pounce, and I was suitably intimidated.

His twin kept the same distance, and was watching me quietly. This was clearly their natural fighting distance. Out of my reach. But they could reach me.

They had powers. Stands. That had forms of their own.

"So..." I said. "You've got your Stands out, then?"

The boy on my right snapped. "You can fuckin' see them!?" he roared. Something grabbed me by the throat. He didn't move at all. Something else had its hand around my neck, and was lifting me into the air. An invisible hand. I could feel the palm, and five fingers. It was shaped like a human, but it wasn't human. Rohan had said some Stands were humanoid, and this was clearly one. I tried to grab the hand, but my fingers passed right through it, catching only empty air. When he saw that, the thug looked

surprised. "You can't...? What? You aren't a Stand Master? What the hell are you doing here? What do you know about Rohan?"

His Stand slammed me up against the Arrow Cross window.

".....what?" I managed.

"Where is Rohan? Don't you even think about lying!"

Where...?

"He's here!" I said, betraying Rohan's trust immediately. I didn't have much choice; my vision was quickly blurring, and I was about to pass out.

"Here!? What are you talking about!? No one's seen him for two weeks! Don't you fuck with me!"

He was missing? **Lately they've been ignoring me.** But they called him *sensei*, and were clearly searching desperately for him. That's why I was dangling in the air like this. This didn't add up. How could they perceive the situation so differently?

The other thug turned towards the house, and yelled, "Rohan-sensei!" The smiling one was watching me closely, saying nothing.

The flow of blood cut off, my brain was gasping for oxygen, but I forced it to think.

"Rohan-sensei!" Thug B yelled, again. "What?" Rohan said. "Honestly, you're the worst," I heard him mutter. But Thug B asked, "Reimi, has Rohan come back?" Like Rohan said, were they ignoring him? "This ain't right," Thug B said. "This murder today, I'm sure it was him. It's not safe for you to be here alone, Reimi." I started sliding higher up the glass. "Eh? But he's suspicious, Reimi," Thug A said.

Eh? Why did he say "Eh?"

Like he was responding to something Sugimoto Reimi said, but I hadn't heard her voice, couldn't see her at all.

I tried to turn my head and get a better look.

"See, Mr. Joestar?" Rohan sighed. "They're the worst."

Thug A spoke over him. "None of us know what he looks like. Heh heh heh." He turned to look at me. "You could be pretending you're a detective. But you're really Kira Yoshikage –"

Oh! I thought. The invisible hand around my throat vanished, and I fell to the ground, almost laughing. I remembered! That was the name! How had I forgotten it?

Wait, what was it again?

The gravel crunched under my knees, and I coughed violently. Thug B run over to me. "Nooo! Fukashigi! Where are you, Fukashigi!" That's a weird thing to say, I thought. Then he grabbed me by the shirt and dragged me to my feet. "So you are a Stand Master?" he yelled. I had no idea what he meant until I looked around. Thug A was gone. "What the hell did you do to Fukashigi? Bring him back right now! Or I'll retire you on the spot! You've got three seconds! One!"

Apparently Fukashigi was Thug A's name, the one who'd been strangling me.

And his sudden disappearance had made Thug B jump to the conclusion that I'd attacked him. He seemed frightened.

"Wait, I have no idea what..." I saw Rohan standing next to him. "Rohan, you saw it! Say something." Thug B saw me looking over his shoulder, and turned to look. He spun back quickly, angry.

"What are you talking about? You're mixed up in his disappearance, aren't you?"

Whaaat? What the hell? "Jesus," Rohan said. "Your brother vanishes and you're still keeping this...practical joke going? What an asshole." No. He wasn't ignoring Rohan.

Thug B couldn't see him.

"He's in on it! Kouji, Reimi, get back! Where's Fukashigi? Tell me right now! Two!" Thug B screamed. The other boy stepped

back, keeping a close eye on me the whole while. I looked around.

They kept talking to Sugimoto Reimi, but there was no sign of her. But she was here.

I just couldn't see her.

"I *will* fuck you up!"

I understood now.

"Time's up! Get ready for a beating! That's what I'm best at!"

When the invisible hand was around my neck, I'd been pressed up against the Arrow House window, and I'd fallen straight down. But that window was a good two meters behind me now.

"Alright, little dog, prepare to get put down!" Thug B said, stepping back away from me. Like Fukashigi (?), he had other ways to attack, and kept his distance when he fought.

"Wait! I can find Fukashigi."

"Whaaat!?" he yelled. But he held off the attack. I stood up.

"I am the detective, Jorge Joestar. I can solve this case!"

It was a little theatrical, but it bought me a few more seconds.

The other boy behind Thug B was calm, but equally tensed, equally on his guard. Rohan looked a little shaken, but mostly just fascinated by what was going on. None of them seemed to be acting. I'd seen through the lies of many a killer, and my lie detection was honed to perfection. None of them were lying. What they said they saw was the truth. That meant Sugimoto Reimi was here, even if I couldn't see her.

And if the four of us hadn't done anything, then Sugimoto Reimi must have spirited Fukashigi away.

But not to harm him; she was Rohan's housemate, and seemed to be friendly with these boys as well. So she hadn't made him disappear; she'd hidden him.

Where? How? What had happened?

Fukashigi had vanished. I had hit the ground. The ground I'd landed on was two meters away from the window I'd been pressed against. When Fukashigi vanished, he didn't throw me aside. The hand was just gone, and I dropped straight down. To two meters away. But my back had been pressed against the glass when he vanished.

The very laws of physics are distorted beyond recognition here.

I had to accept this new rule. I hadn't moved.

The window had moved two meters forward, dropped me, and moved two meters back. In an instant.

The window had moved on its own? That wouldn't be enough to hide a big guy like Fukashigi. You'd need to move something bigger to hide him.

But what? I went over to the west sunroom window I'd been pressed against, bent down, and moved the gravel aside. There was nothing but dirt underneath. The outer walls looked like they went underground, but I looked closer, and saw a faint line running across it.

A gap.

Forget the old physics.

Okay. I stood up, and ran through it again. Why had she needed to hide Fukashigi? At that exact moment?

What had he done?

He'd said that name. Then vanished just as I remembered it.

The name I couldn't remember (again) was the key. Of course it was. Rohan had told me as much.

Speaking his name means death. You explode.

Your entire body is the bomb.

I should take that literally. If you said that name, you'd explode, and die. But Sugimoto Reimi had prevented that.

She had put him in a vacuum to prevent the explosion.
By placing him under the Arrow Cross House.

This was Sugimoto Reimi's power.

But she was not a Stand Master, not a human. If she was, I'd have been able to see her, just like the three boys. I couldn't see her, because she wasn't a Stand Master. Fukashigi had proven I wasn't.

You can fuckin' see them!?

You can't...? What? You aren't a Stand Master?

Being able to see Stands was proof you had one. And I couldn't see Sugimoto Reimi. The girl with amnesia...or not.

She was a Stand. A humanoid one. She wasn't human, so had no memories. Stands didn't simply stand by you, they had powers. Sugimoto Reimi's power – difficult as it was to believe – clearly allowed her to move the Arrow Cross. She had moved the building to hide Fukashigi.

And one other.

I looked at Rohan. He spent most of his time at home, not meeting anyone, and had not realized the girl he lived with wasn't human. He was grinning, enjoying this turn of events, but he was invisible too.

I could see him, but the three boys couldn't. If Stand Masters couldn't see him, he wasn't a Stand. He was something else. Not a Stand, but not alive.

But not dead, either. Hidden, just like Fukashigi.

How did being under the Arrow Cross keep Fukashigi and Rohan alive? Was there oxygen down there? I didn't know, but it didn't matter. The laws of physics didn't apply. What mattered was

that both were alive. If she'd intended to crush them to death under the Arrow Cross, she could have just let them explode.

But if both Rohan and Fukashigi were trapped between life and death, why was Rohan standing in front of me, talking?

Because he was a manga artist, and had deadlines. Too worried about his schedule to die if you killed him.

"Rohan," I said. Thug B looked for him again, but couldn't see him. "You can use your stand to control people, or change their nature?"

He nodded. "I can. That is the power of Heaven's Door."

? Was that the Stand's name?

Whatever. "Okay, then first, can you make it so I can see Stands?"

Rohan stopped smiling. "Are you sure? There are some things you're better off not knowing. Not getting involved with."

I nodded. "I'm a detective. I need to know all the facts. If Stands are a fact of this case, then I have to see them to know them."

"Ok. Heh heh heh. I admire your gumption. Then I shall open your doors! Heaven's Door!"

I'm not entirely sure it was strictly necessary to shout his Stand's name like a fighting move, but he fwipfwipfwip drew his manga character and I went ftttzzz.

But this time I saw it.

My face peeling away like the pages of a book.

"Aaaaugh!" I yelled. "Heh," Rohan said. "My Stand lets me turn anyone who sees my character into a book. I can read everything there is to know about you, and write new orders or facts into your pages. Ha ha ha!"

Trying to keep the pages of my face from flapping in the breeze, I glanced over at Thug B. There were strange dolphins floating in the air next to him. Three of them.

"If you're a book," he said. "Then that means Rohan's alive, and with us?"

"Yes."

"Who are you staring at?" he growled.

I looked at the boy next to him. He had a propeller on his head, like something out of Doraemon. "Yeah, it's kind of lame," he said, bobbing his head. Surprised, I almost laughed, but caught myself in time.

"What was the missing boy's Stand like?"

"Why should we tell you?" his brother snarled.

"I need all the information to solve this case. I'm trying to find your brother." The propeller boy filled me in. Fukashigi's Stand was named NYPD Blue. He was a good cop, but had a foul mouth, and an abrasive personality. Apparently he was a New Yorker to the core. Hunh?

Finally I looked at the attractive girl next to Rohan. She looked a little older than me. I could see her at last. "I apologize for the delay, Sugimoto Reimi. My name is Jorge Joestar."

She smiled, and said hello, but her voice shook. She was scared. Of what? Of the others finding out she was a Stand?

She must have seen the hesitation in my face. "Don't worry," she said. "I don't know if the truth is always the best course, but misunderstandings and lies will get us nowhere."

She ended with a smile. She was quite beautiful.

The best course? Those words were gospel to me.

Sugimoto reached out and took Rohan's hand, and said, "Right, Rohan?"

"Eh? What's going on?" He said, turning bright red. I was suddenly jealous. Of course, I thought. She was worried about this delicate manga artist.

I took her at her word. "Rohan, next use Heaven's Door on these boys."

"Boys?" Thug B said. "You're the same age," he grumbled.

"Make so they can see, um...not ghosts, exactly, but, um...astral projections."

Rohan caught my meaning, and looked stunned, but the moment Heaven's Door made the change, the two boys could see him. Amid their cries of jubilation and surprise, I explained my thinking, had Sugimoto let me under the Arrow Cross House to check the suspended bodies of Rohan and Fukashigi.

Rohan stared at himself wordlessly, and then looked at Sugimoto, who he now knew wasn't human after all.

"So what happened to all the food and coffee you had? A waste of my supplies!" he said, making a show of sulking.

Sugimoto just smiled. "Sorry. But I wanted to eat with you."

"...look, I'm not mad about it, or anything." They were just flirting!

We moved back inside, and I had them explain the basics of Stand powers as we did. I had Sugimoto move the building, did an experiment to prove a theory of mine, and was sure I'd solved another mystery.

"So this explains how the murder display and locked room could be created in one minute, Rohan. When you finished working last night, you went to sleep in your own bedroom, the east sunroom. Like you always do. There's no way you could get up from your desk, turn the wrong way, and leave through the wrong door. Even if you somehow did, with the furniture in the west sunroom laid out in a mirror image of your own bedroom, you're much too high strung – if you'll forgive the expression – to have missed it. You went to sleep in the east sunroom, like you always do. But when dawn arrived, the house had been turned 180 degrees, and you were on the west side. The light was odd enough

to wake you, and you assumed you must have gone to sleep on the wrong side. You got up to trade rooms with Sugimoto, but before you left, you glanced at the empty north sunroom – which was actually the south sunroom. Since you don't use the south sunroom, it was naturally empty. Rohan, did you happen to look south at all? At the actual north sunroom?"

".....no, I didn't."

"If you had, I'm sure you would have seen the Kintaro display already completed. And it was bright enough that, if you had stopped to look, you would have noticed that everything in the room was backwards. Because everything was laid out the way you were used to, you didn't notice in the few seconds you were there. The only thing out of place was the position of the sun. So, you left the east sunroom, which was on the west side, crossed the work room, and woke Sugimoto in the west sunroom, which was on the east side. When she woke, Sugimoto noticed that the building had somehow turned, and immediately turned it back. She did this while you were in the work room, headed for the hallway to the north sunroom. Without you noticing, the north sunroom moved from the south side of the building back to the north, where it was when you found Tsukumojuku's body."

Sugimoto nodded. "That's more or less accurate. I didn't consciously turn the building back, but when I woke up, the building did turn 180 degrees, back to the way it normally sits."

"But...that means..." Rohan started, but I didn't let him.

"Yes, this only makes sense if the center of the Arrow Cross House, the square room you use as a work room, does not turn with the four arrows. That's what I just verified. As I thought, no matter how fast the house is spinning, the center room doesn't move at all."

The laws of physics did not apply.

Conventional logic would never have allowed me to reach

this solution; only once I absorbed the logical contradictions of it could I reach the truth. "I believe the four arrows and this central building are not actually linked. They appear to be part of the same building, but are technically two different pieces."

I had my eyes fixed on Sugimoto, but I could see Rohan's jaw drop next to her.

"Remember, Rohan, there was originally a building with no windows or doors on this hill. Later on, without anyone noticing, it became this building. It wasn't rebuilt; it was remodeled. The Arrow Cross was built around the Cube House, but the original building remains – and you work inside of it. Right?"

Sugimoto seemed very impressed by the accuracy of my deductions. "Wow. You're absolutely right."

"In other words, Sugimoto's Stand power was originally shaped like Cube House. But five years ago, it changed shape to Arrow Cross House. This sort of thing happens with Stands sometimes, doesn't it? Rohan. Sudden changes or evolutions occur to both the visible Stand and the Stand's abilities, right?"

"Yes. Nothing like that has happened with Heaven's Door, but it is possible."

Thug B – Nijimura Muryotaisu – was waiting outside. His weird looking dolphin stand, Grand Blue, was originally only one dolphin. But now it was three. Things like that happened.

And during the fight with this killer whose name I was better off not remembering, a similar thing had happened to his Stand, Killer Queen. When they first encountered him, all he could do was touch things, turning them into bombs that he could detonate remotely. Then it could split part of itself off into a bomb that could track its prey automatically – Sheer Heart Attack. And now it had a new power, Bites the Dust, which could make people explode if they so much as spoke his name. Unless they defeated this killer, or somehow got him to turn off his third power, Rohan

and Nijimura Fukashigi would have to stay under the Arrow Cross, away from oxygen.

"I do have some questions," I said. "When you were shaped like Cube House, what power did you have?"

Sugimoto hesitated. "...sorry. I don't remember."

I suppose she wouldn't. Sugimoto Reimi was a Stand with the power to move the Arrow Cross House. She had replaced whatever...personality? I guess? The Stand attached to Cube House had had.

"...I see. Then...it seems you sleep at night like a normal human, but during that time, what happens to the Arrow Cross? In other words, does it frequently turn on its own, like it did this morning?"

"Hmmm...well, I'd be asleep, so I wouldn't remember, but this is the first time I've ever woken up and found the building turned."

".....? Interesting."

There were a few details we had not yet clarified, but I also had to catch Tsukumojuku's killer, figure out how they made the locked room, and search for the killer whose name must not be remembered. I was about to proceed when Nijimura Muryotaisu came into the room.

"Sugimoto, why are you moving the house?" he asked.

We went outside, and Arrow Cross House was rocking back and forth. It had been impossible to tell from inside, but it was as if the building sensed something wrong, and was trashing wildly to get our attention.

"This isn't me," Sugimoto said.

I looked around.

From looking at the building and the land around us, it was

hard to tell, but once I looked up it fell into place. The clouds in the sky were matching the movements of the house exactly.

But it wasn't the sky that was moving.

The ground was moving, and the Arrow Cross House was staying perfectly still. The polar bear was pointed due north at all times. "It's like a giant compass," I said.

Hirose Kouji flew up into the air on his Doraemon propeller, Blue Thunder. A chasm had opened along the borders of Morioh, and it had split off from the main land. It was now an island floating on the sea, headed north along the coast of the Japan Sea.

We all stood stunned after hearing his report. "While we're all surprised may not be the best time," Rohan whispered in my ear. "But what sort of person are you?"

I didn't know what he meant, so I had no answer.

"I've been wondering if I should say anything," Rohan continued. "But like Sugimoto said..."

I don't know if the truth is always the best course, but misunderstandings and lies will get us nowhere.

"You're a detective, and seem to have what it takes."

I'm a detective. I need to know all the facts.

"So I'll tell you the truth. When I used Heaven's Door to read your book, all your adventures as a detective in Nishi Akatsuki were listed under the heading: *Forgery*."

Hunh?

"Behind your left ear, I found the *Real* account. It was very short. 'Born in 1889 in the Canary Islands off the coast of Spain.

Became a pilot in the English air force, and fought in WWI. Murdered in 1920 by an air force general.' That's all it said. I have never met someone with real and fake books, and the real contents are very strange. England and the Canary Islands don't exist, and 1889? You were born 123 years ago, and died 92 years ago. If this is truly your real life, then how old are you?"

FIVE
The Box
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In the one photograph of him Mum had, taken at their wedding, Dad was handsome; not much taller than me, but three times as burly, with thick, straight, strong eyebrows, and gentle eyes. There was a sadness to him, like a frightened dog, trying to hide his weakness. His mouth was firmly closed, and he didn't seem like he was particularly talkative. His hair seemed soft and floppy, and tumbled over his ears and down his neck. Mum was standing close to him as if she could not love him more, and as if she was prepared to protect this fragile giant from anything that came his way. When Mum led us into a basement room I had no idea even existed, and showed us Jonathan Joestar's head, he looked exactly like the picture, except his eyes were closed, and there was nothing below the neck.

When she'd told us she kept the severed head of my father for fifteen years since his death, I'd imagined a skull, with no flesh intact. But this head looked like he'd been killed mere moments ago – no, like he was still alive. The color of his skin was normal, with a healthy glow; his hair and eyebrows and eyelashes were black, like they were wet. His lips were pursed – this was an oddly attractive severed head. Mum kept it in a beautiful glass case that she clearly cleaned often.

"Jorge, this is your father," Mum said, but he seemed so alive I was afraid to say hello in case he opened his eyes and answered.

"It...it is dead, right?" I asked.

"Don't call him 'it'!" Mum snapped, the whip crack in her voice at least twice as strong as I'd ever heard it. She wasn't my Mum here; she was this head's wife.

"Sorry. But...he really looks like he's still alive," I said. Mum didn't answer.

Eh? He was dead, right?

"Gracious," Lisa Lisa said, her hands at her mouth. This all came as a shock to her, too. "Then the rest of him...that horrible man who was in the box with us, he really..."

"You...remember? Lisa Lisa?"

"Yes. I thought it was a dream. That man was so scary, and you were so scared that I...I didn't really understand, but it seemed like you loved each other, and he seemed like Jorge's father, but Jorge's father was never so fearsome he made the very air around him quiver..."

Like she loved him?

What did that mean? Confused, I looked at Mum, and she looked guilty. This confused me more. What did it mean? In that box or coffin, while I was still inside her...what happened?

Mum sighed. "If you saw all that...of course you saw it, the box was so very small. But to actually remember it? You really are extraordinary, Lisa Lisa."

"Sorry....."

"You did nothing wrong. Heh heh heh. I suppose you did remember Jonathan's final breath, after all."

"...I was scared, I think. Desperate."

"Yes. And that fear didn't end when we escaped the ship."

"....."

"Let me start at the beginning," Mum said. She had Straits and Penelope go upstairs, leaving only Lisa Lisa and myself.

There was a couch, an easy chair and a table placed opposite the glass cabinet. It was clear Mum came down here sometimes, and spent time with him. Mum sat on the easy chair, and Lisa Lisa and I sat next to each other on the couch. This did not leave us facing her; the couches were arranged diagonally, like the letter V, so that you could gaze upon my father's head in the cabinet no matter which you were sitting on. It was clear Mum would sometimes lie down on this couch, gazing at father. Just the two of them.

Even now, her eyes weren't looking at us, but at him.

We sat there a while, but Mum didn't say anything, so I tried to process the terrifying story I'd just heard. The horrible fate of Jonathan Joestar and Dio Brando. My uncle had become a vampire!

I'd been a naïve fool. The story of my parents and the mystery of my birth were something I should have thought about, doubted, asked about. But I had been too busy wallowing in self-pity to do that.

Thinking about it now, I should at least have asked how only Mum managed to survive the sinking of a ship with so many passengers, especially when my father, for all his muscles, didn't. Passenger ships were equipped with a large number of lifeboats in case an accident happened. But if the explosion had been so sudden nobody else survived, then Mum must have known about the explosion at least a few minutes before it happened. If she had known, Dad would have. If Dad hadn't survived with her, then he must have died before the explosion, or been close to death. She must have hidden in the box just before the explosion, with no time to save anyone else. Otherwise Mum would almost certainly have brought his body with her. Mum would never leave Dad behind, even if he was dead. Lisa Lisa understood that as well, which was why she'd leveled these accusations.

And this special box. Why was such a thing conveniently by Mum's side in a situation so dire only she and Lisa Lisa could escape? Why was it so strong it could survive a ship exploding?

Because someone had needed that box, and Mum was with that someone. That someone being the vampire Dio. Mum had witnessed him killing Dad. Dad died, and only his head remained. Even though it was Dio who had been only a head right before the ship exploded.

What happened to my father's body?

There was an obvious answer, but I was afraid to think it. The terrifying man in Lisa Lisa's memories explained it. But Lisa Lisa had said Mum and that man seemed like they loved each other. I had no idea what that meant. I didn't want to know. But I couldn't stand up and run upstairs. Straits and everyone were waiting up there, and they'd laugh if I ran. I'd already shown Straits how pathetic I was five years ago. **I don't want power like Lisa Lisa's,**

I'd said, sniveling. I'd refused to face this stuff. But if I ran from their scorn and went outside, even more terrifying things awaited me. The very things I'd incurred shame to avoid might get me.

There was nowhere on the island for me to hide.

Lisa Lisa grew impatient, and started asking questions about the very things I didn't want to hear.

"Mama Erina, did you save Dio from that explosion?"

"....."

"Don't think I'm being unsympathetic. Just...if only Jorge's father's head is here, then that must be because Dio stole his body. Right? I can see why you'd want to protect your husband's body. You could never have known just how terrifying Dio Brando really was. You would have wanted Jonathan Joestar's flesh to survive, even if that meant it was Dio Brando's body. Nobody's blaming you for that. But what bothers me is the intimacy between you, so strong I sensed it even as a baby."

"....."

"...you and Jonathan were friends as children, right? Which means Dio was, too. I went to England, researching Dio Brando's life. I went to the remains of the Joestar manor. I talked to people in town. They told me that you and Jorge's father first became a couple when you were thirteen, but that Dio Brando forced you to split up. Some people even said you cheated on Jonathan. I didn't believe them, but Dio Brando clearly did something that made it so the two of you couldn't even look at each other. I'd always assumed the man who murdered Jorge's grandfather and became a vampire was a violent, evil man, but to my surprise, he was very popular with people around the Joestar manor. More popular than Jonathan Joestar. He was smart, a gentleman, had many friends, both men and women. He was a rugby star but never lorded it over anyone; his teammates trusted him completely, and he always had time for his fans. He was the most popular person in town. Half of them still believe he was innocent! He was quite popular with the ladies, but seemingly never had a girlfriend. Many people seem to think that's

because he loved you, Mama Erina. Whatever happened when you were thirteen has become quite the romantic legend. I guess my point is...if Jorge's father didn't tell you anything about Dio Brando, and the vampire's public image was of a splendid gentleman, then I can understand you being confused on the raft."

Hmm? What was Lisa Lisa implying? The mood was too tense for me to dare ask.

"Elizabeth," Mum said, catching her eye. It was so rare for her to address Lisa Lisa by her real name that we both gasped.

"Yes?" Lisa Lisa squeaked.

"You are only sixteen," Mum said. "A little girl like you should never attempt to speak of matters of the heart as if she could possibly understand. You know nothing, yet. At the least, you have no idea what there was between myself and Jonathan, and what remains between us today."

Yikes!

I'd seen her scold Lisa Lisa before, but she never got this emotional. I knew this wasn't because Lisa Lisa had hit the nail on the head, or because her pride had been wounded, or anything petty like that. Lisa Lisa knew that too. Mum avoided letting bitterness or anger or other negative emotions show. The angrier she got, the calmer she was, the more chilly her behavior. She never smiled more than when she was faced with unpleasantness or misfortune. But now? Her anger made her act angry. And this was clearly because it involved my father.

"...but I suppose there are many things you couldn't hope to understand because I haven't told you anything," she said, her tone gentle again. I was relieved. Lisa Lisa must be as well. Except Mum had one more snap of the whip inside her. "But that's no excuse for speculating on puerile rumors."

Then Mum began her story.

"Dio Brando was evil from the day I met him. Sly, cruel, and manipulative, he made no attempt to hide his lust for control. But he was so charismatic that many people unreservedly admired

his behavior. The only people not blinded to his true nature were those who didn't want his favor, and there weren't many of them. The vast majority approved of his brash cunning, and realized instinctively if they ever crossed him he would destroy them. They may not have been conscious of it, but they were desperate to stay on his good side. Anyone who enraged him would be cast out, tormented mercilessly by his lackeys. People saw this, and were afraid to get involved; they averted their eyes, and refused to even talk about him. So the only ones who knew his true evil – who were forced to see the blackness of his soul – were those not allowed to curry favor, not allowed to avert their eyes. Those he directly and methodically went after. This was primarily Jonathan Joestar. But only for a short period after Dio joined the Joestar family. Once he forced me and Jonathan apart, he ceased attacking Jonathan directly, and turned his focus towards me. Not that he ever did anything – he simply watched me closely, making sure I never came near Jonathan. At first, I thought he was trying to force Jonathan further into solitude. After all, when Jonathan and I first drew close, Dio had stolen every friend Jonathan had – except his pet dog. Shortly after I was forced away from Jonathan, I heard that dog, Danny, had died in a horrible, mysterious accident. Jonathan was completely alone now, I thought. But Dio completely changed the way he treated Jonathan, like he was different person entirely. All Jonathan's old friends returned, and he began throwing his arm over Jonathan's shoulders with a friendly smile, as if there had never been a conflict between them. From a distance, I could tell Jonathan found this disconcerting. While having his friends back was a relief, he never was quite able to shake the suspicion Dio's about face engendered. In other words, Dio had left him dangling on the cliffs of solitude. Being surrounded by pretend 'friends' he could never really trust preserved his isolation permanently. If he'd been left alone, he may well have found a real friend somewhere else. Dio had saved himself the effort of crushing each new friend individually. But...while the other boys were allowed in Jonathan's

company, he kept a close watch on me, keeping me from getting close. More than anything, this convinced me of the truth. That no matter how much Dio tried to prevent it, I alone, if we so much as saw each other, if we so much as exchanged a glance, I could reach Jonathan's heart. That's why he worked so hard to keep that from happening. Knowing how awful it must be for Jonathan, unable to trust anyone around him, I wondered for a long time if I should do something. In the end, I gave up. After all, Jonathan could fight for me, but he could not protect me."

I was shocked to hear Mum say this. I mean, Dad was right over there. He may be just a head, but he seemed so alive.

Mum saw the look on my face, and laughed. "Don't worry, Jorge. I've said as much many a time while talking with your father down here."

Ehhh? What about speaking ill of the dead...?

"Heh heh heh. You see, there was something else I knew. I knew Jonathan would never let Dio destroy his life. I knew fate would bring us together again one day. But what brought that about what much worse than I had ever imagined. I became a nurse, and Jonathan was brought to my care from the fire at the Joestar manor, badly injured and barely alive. A short time later Jonathan left me again, without a word, to continue his fight. I didn't mind. I kept the faith, and he came back to me – once again, badly hurt. He had settled matters with Dio Brando at last, and we were married. Or so I believed. But as I said earlier, Dio had survived – or at least, his head had. Once again he tried to pry me from Jonathan. Heh heh. My husband was a bit of a fool, you see. What kind of idiot doesn't bother looking for the body of an immortal vampire?"

Mum looked over at Dad's head and smiled, not a trace of sadness or regret, just tenderness and love. She was an amazing woman, I thought. I heard Lisa Lisa gulp.

"Now we're getting to the heart of the matter," Mum said. Lisa Lisa and I exchanged glances. "What happened when Jonathan and Dio Brando fought for a third time, and what happened to me,

Lisa Lisa, and Jorge inside me while we were adrift on that box." She closed her eyes for a minute, then opened them and began.

"The scene on that ship was like something from another world. The dead were attacking the living, and every room, every corridor echoed with screams, horrible groans, and sinister laughter. The smell of blood and the palpable heat of madness filled the air. And in the middle of all of that, Jonathan and Dio Brando fought. It was all over in a flash, right in front of my eyes. Jonathan accepted his death, but when I vowed to die with him, he pointed to baby Lisa Lisa, where she lay crying, and told me to save her and live. I could not refuse, so I picked up Lisa Lisa, and climbed into the box. You could tell at a glance it was no ordinary box. It was a bomb shelter, shaped like coffin, large enough for an adult to climb inside. I could lock it from the inside. Just before I shut the lid, I looked back, wondering if I could somehow get Jonathan inside, but he had Dio's head wrapped tightly in his arms, and no longer had the strength to stand. Jonathan was so much heavier than me I could never move him in time, not with the machine room looking ready to burst at any second. And Jonathan was using his last strength to hold Dio captive. There was no chance I could have pried Dio loose and saved Jonathan's body alone. 'Be happy, Erina,' he said, and his smile pushed me into the box. 'Think about it, Jojo!' I heard Dio cry. 'I can grant you eternal life!' I closed the lid, and locked it from the inside. As I did, there was a thunderous roar, and an explosion flung the box away. Lisa Lisa was crying in my arms, and I tried not to scream. I remembered a lullaby I'd heard as a child, and tried singing that. The cushions on the inside of the box were very soft, and I had an idea the box belonged to Dio Brando, so I wasn't as worried as you might think. Dio Brando, for all his faults, was a clever man, and would take precautions. There were several more explosions outside the box, and we were flung up, down, right, and left, but the sturdy iron frame and thick cushions absorbed most of the impact. In time, the box began to bob gently. We must have fallen into the water, I thought. If anyone else

survived, I would have to try and save them, I thought. So I opened the box. I knew full well that anything floating on the water might not be human at all, but one of those moving corpses. But I allowed myself to hope that Jonathan's body would be floating nearby, and I had to look. I first pressed my ear against the lid, trying to catch the cries and laughter of the dead. All I heard was the sound of water lapping, so I turned the key, and opened the lid a crack. There was no sign of any horror. Through the gap I could see the sky. The sun had just set, and it was a beautiful shade of purple. The sea breeze slipped in with the light, and it was if it carried all the madness and horror away with it. Relieved, I opened the lid, and sat up. To my surprise, we were over a hundred meters from the remains of the ship. I looked around, but saw no survivors, living or dead. I put my hand in the water, intending to paddle back to the ship. And then I saw a hand under the box. It tried to grab my arm. I recognized it. I knew that arm, that hand, those fingers."

"I snatched my hand out of the water, and tried to close the lid again...but then I realized Lisa Lisa wasn't lying next to me. 'Erina Pendleton,' a voice said. I turned, and the terrifying face of Dio Brando was floating on the surface of the water. Below his head was a body that had not been there a moment ago, and that big, burly body was wearing tattered, burned clothing I knew only too well. Dio must have escaped Jonathan's grip as the explosion hit, and stolen his body. The grief and terror were so strong I wanted to cry, but I could not afford the luxury. Dio had Jonathan's feet impaled on a stick of wood embedded in the tattered side of the box. A wave of fury crossed me at the thought of him being so rough with my husband's body, but I did not dare voice my anger. I could not do so because what had been Jonathan's arms were cradling little Lisa Lisa against what had been Jonathan's chest, and Dio Brando had his fangs bared. 'Or should I say Erina Joestar?' he asked. Half his face had been blown away in the explosion, but that

only made his half-smile all the more terrifying. Dio's head seemed to be barely keeping a grip on Jonathan's shoulders. He offered me a deal. 'Your choice,' he said. 'Baby Lisa Lisa's blood, or mine.'"

"I had promised Jonathan I would save Lisa Lisa's life. I told him if he laid a finger on him, I would pull his feet off the stake and leave him adrift in the sea. I didn't think he had the strength to fight me, and if he had, he would not have needed to steal Lisa Lisa and try to bargain with me. 'Then there is only one answer,' Dio said. I said nothing, but I knew I had to accept it. Giving baby Lisa Lisa to a vampire was not a choice I could consider. 'If it helps, think of it this way,' Dio said. 'You aren't keeping me alive. You're keeping your husband's body alive.' I let this pass, but made him promise not to turn me into one of those horrible living corpses. 'I will duly honor whoever saves me life,' Dio said. 'The same honor I gave Jonathan Joestar I give his wife.' But the only honor he'd tried to give my husband on that ship was a swift and painless death. This was Dio's arrogance. I held out my arm, and allowed him to feed. Then I took Lisa Lisa, and rested in the box. Dio Brando was not a man prone to restraint, and had drunk so much blood I could barely remain conscious. Before I shut the lid, Dio said, 'I thought my meeting with Jonathan Joestar was fated, but it appears destiny guided the three of us together.' I did not answer him."

"Dio spent that night struggling, in terrible pain. I heard him thrashing in the water, climbing onto the lid and dropping back into the sea, fighting for control of the body. Sometimes he yelled at it, other times he screamed like a madman, shaking the lid, and there was nothing I could do but clutch Lisa Lisa and tremble. Of course Dio was in pain. He was trying to merge with a body nothing like his own, not even the same blood type. I was a nurse, and I knew

that would have been impossible for any normal human. The human body rejects foreign tissue, and attacks it. If the blood type matches, a blood transfusion is possible. But organs and bones are not so easy. Trying to screw a head onto a different body was unthinkable. After a long time, I stopped hearing Dio's voice, and he stopped thrashing about. I hoped Jonathan's body had rejected Dio's head, and Dio's attempt to steal his body had failed. I hoped to find him reduced to a severed head again. I hoped his silence signaled failure. But after a long time, I heard Dio laughing, and my hopes were dashed. Jonathan's body would not be released. Dio shouted, and this time I heard him clearly. 'The world is mine! OK, OK. The way to heaven? Hmph! I *will* get there!' The pride in his voice made me sick with fear. Trembling in the darkness of the box, I began wondering how I could possibly bury this devil."

"Before the sun rose, Dio knocked on the lid and woke me up. When I opened it, he said, 'Let me drink one more time before the sun rises.' I held out my arm for him to drink. When he was done, he said, 'You must be hungry. It's hardly fair for me to gain strength while you dwindle, and I need you to keep making fresh blood.' He showed me a fistfull of fish he'd caught. Then he grabbed a bit of broken ship floating nearby. A light shot out of his eyes, setting the wood on fire, and he used it to cook the fish, and handed them to me. I knew that light was the same thing that had stolen Jonathan's life. Yet now it was saving mine. I took the fish from him, chewed them, and fed them to Lisa Lisa. From her size, she was only three months old. It was a gamble, but she was losing strength quickly. I had lost a lot of blood, and had very little strength. I was starving, but I couldn't bear to take food from Dio. When he saw I wasn't eating myself, he said, 'You may not wish to eat what I provide. But if you'll feed this baby, you should feed the baby inside you as well.' At the time, I had not yet realized I was pregnant. But I had been aware of a change in my body. I never

expected to hear such news from him. I was shaken by this, but my feminine instincts told me he was telling the truth. When I was done feeding Lisa Lisa, I ate the rest of the fish myself. I had no choice. 'Eat well, make lots of blood – so much I can't drink it all.' I had no intention of dictating how much blood he could drink. Our deal was made, and I had nothing further to bargain with. Dio had recovered enough that he could easily kill me if the whim struck him. At any rate, the fish were delicious. I ate quickly, chewed, and swallowed. My stomach set to work, and my body started making blood. I could feel my pulse growing stronger. Blood is the power that keeps us alive, and gives us our strength. Not surprising it gives vampires powers humans could never have. Once I had eaten my fill of fish, Dio began gulping down sea water. 'Once it has entered my body, I can change it as I please,' he smirked. He turned the water from salt to fresh, then reached out his hands, slipped Jonathan's fingers into Lisa Lisa and me – just like he did to feed – and injected water into our bodies. 'The sun will rise soon. I can't do anything while it's out. I can't have you dying of thirst. Once the sun rises, close the lid, and avoid exerting yourself in any way. The box is designed to maintain a comfortable temperature no matter what happens outside.' Dio began to move back in the water, to hide under the box. But I stopped him, and told him to get in the box. Not in the same compartment as me or Lisa Lisa, of course. I had worked out that this box had two layers. The depth of my berth compared to the height of the outside made it clear there was room below the cushions for another person. An emergency second compartment seemed like a precaution any smart vampire would make to avoid the sunlight. Holding Lisa Lisa, I moved onto the open lid, and Dio climbed out of the water. 'Did you think you'd be more likely to get your chance in this box than the water, Erina Joestar?' he asked. He'd seen right through my scheme. There was nothing I could say. Underneath the box, Dio could easily escape. If he swam down a few dozen meters, the sun could never reach him, and he was a vampire – obviously he could do that. But if he was in

the box with me, all I had to do was open the lid, and the sun would pour in. Dio knew exactly what I'd been thinking. He shook the water off, and said, 'Let me remind you that I can kill you at any moment. I can tear that baby to pieces, I can reach into your belly, tear out that embryo, and eat it while you watch. Remember that. Remember it well. The only reason I don't is out of respect. Like I said. Each tiresome scheme you attempt lowers my respect for you. If I cease to respect you, I will inflict the greatest indignity upon you.' I was frozen with fear. Dio leaned close, and whispered in my ear. 'You wanted me in the lower compartment. It was so obvious. Are you really that stupid? No one that simple-minded has any right to Jonathan's hand.' Those words went straight to my heart, and tore right through me. 'You will be punished. I'll take back what the fish gave you.' His shoved his fingers in my neck, and drained my blood again. Our deal had ended. Whatever pretense we had of equality had crumbled in an instant.'

"Further punishment,' he said, and snatched Lisa Lisa from my arms. I was too woozy to resist. He then threw me face down in the second compartment. The cushions inside were just as thick, so it didn't hurt that much, but Dio must have seen me try and shield my womb. 'If you really are stupid, that baby will die,' he said. He replaced the partition, shutting me in the bottom of the box. I heard a click a moment later, so I assumed he had closed the lid to keep the sun out. In the darkness I put my hands on my belly, and tried desperately to stop myself from passing out. If I lost consciousness, I felt my bodily functions would fade so much the baby would die. After what seemed like a long, long, long time, I heard Dio's voice through the cushion. 'Don't you dare die, Erina Joestar. If you die, I'll have to eat this baby.' The thought of little Lisa Lisa in his hands made me desperate to communicate that I was still alive down here, but my voice was a hoarse whisper, and there was nothing hard to tap, just soft cushions that absorbed all sound. 'You can't just make

this easy?' he growled, and flipped the box, so it was resting upside down. Now I was lying on my back, unable to move. Right before my eyes, a small door I'd never noticed slid open, and I could see the blue sky up above. The white clouds and dazzling sunlight did wonders for my spirit, and I was able to lift myself up to the little window, and peer out. Sitting on top of the box was a bird, its wings torn off, and its body roasted. 'Eat that. Make blood,' said Dio's voice beneath me. I did as he said, wondering as I ate how Dio could open this window, and prepare this meal without entering the sunlight. I was too dazed to think clearly, and no answer came. I understood only one thing – that Dio had some power I didn't understand. And this new power could grab a bird out of the sky in broad daylight, light a fire, and cook it. None of that could be done while hiding under a box in the water. None of that could be done without leaving the compartment beneath me, which Dio had not done."

"I devoured the bird, and once again the fresh blood came rushing through my body. At last my mind started working. The first thought I had was that if there were birds, we must not be that far from land. That improved our odds of rescue, possibly in the near future. I had only to survive until then. And somehow protect Lisa Lisa that long. I had given up all hope of killing Dio at sea. I was only interested in survival. Not to save my own life, but for Lisa Lisa, and the child inside of me. But whatever spirit the new blood brought me was dashed away with a single roar from Dio. 'Hey! Shut the door and get back inside the box, you awful cow! Don't let light inside my box! If you're done eating, get back in your hole, bitch!' Nobody had ever spoken to me like that. I'd never associated with anyone who used language like that. It was as great a shock to me as being struck by lightning. But Dio did not even allow me time to reel. 'I'm sick of your dainty bullshit! You could have eaten the fish and that bird raw! I could have jammed them

straight into your stomach rather than let you feed yourself! The only reason I didn't is out of consideration! Yet you can't even show me the same in kind? Cut the damn sunlight off!' Such a torrent of abuse. I hastily closed the door. With it shut, all I could do was lie there in the darkness, and listen to Dio rant. I knew nothing of 'true suffering'; being a nurse just proved I was 'a hypocrite'; deep down I was really 'phony', 'slow', and 'a plague that drags people down the more you try to help'. That's why Jonathan died, he said. 'The reason I had to kill Jonathan begins with you.' 'When we were children, I just made a little pass at you, and Jonathan lost his damn mind, attacked me for no reason. That's why I had to kill him.' 'Jonathan was a good guy. If he'd never attacked me, we would have been real friends. Brothers. But you made sure that never happened.' 'The reason Jonathan died was because you used him to get at me.' 'You killed Jonathan Joestar.' I could argue with none of this. I just stifled my voice, and cried as quietly as I could. It was agonizing. I wanted to yell back, but...I couldn't. I was so unused to being treated like this that in the back of my mind, I started to wonder if maybe he had a point. After all, I had just lost my beloved husband in a way that hardly seemed real. I was not in control of my emotions. And Dio took advantage of that. He didn't let me think. He kept the harassment going for hours, violently changing his manner to keep me off balance. If I started crying he'd fall silent for a minute, then change his tone. 'I said I would show you respect. I'm sorry. I couldn't control my own emotions. I said things I shouldn't have. Closing the door was better for you, as well. Like I said, what I can do during the day is limited. If you were dehydrated, I'm not sure I could save you. So I wanted you back in the box as soon as possible, before you started to sweat.' Earlier he'd claimed he could do nothing during the day. But he'd been able to flip the box, cook a bird, and feed it to me. I was too afraid to challenge him on this. His behavior was bizarre, unstable, and unpredictable. The more Dio told me about how everything he did was for me, the more I apologized. Saying what he wanted to

hear. 'I should have thought of that. I'm so sorry.' All I wanted to do was get him to stop blaming me, then explaining how I'd betrayed his respect and enraged him. But apologizing just made him change tactics again. 'You're sorry? Sorry for what?' 'You don't even know what you're apologizing for. Are you mocking me?' 'I'm showing you respect, and you're ignoring it!' The hidden door flew open, and I was dragged out of the box. How he did this, I didn't know. Something grabbed a handful of my clothing, but I couldn't see what. This invisible thing threw me into the water. We'd been on our honeymoon, and I was dressed for dinner. In an instant, it was soaked through, and heavy, and tangled with my limbs. I couldn't swim in that, not as weak as I was; I sank like a stone. Dio left me until I had nearly drowned, then his invisible power yanked me out of the water again, and put me in the box. I coughed up water, shaking, and he demanded that I show 'remorse'. I said anything he wanted me to say, desperate not to get thrown in the water again. Then his voice turned sweet again. He explained how worthless I was, how much I deserved to be drowned, or have him feed on my blood, how all of this was done for my benefit, out of kindness. He fed me enough to restore what he drank, and then began screaming at me again over nothing. By noon I was completely under his control. I didn't want him to drown me, didn't want him to drink from me, and nothing else mattered. Then for some imagined slight Dio demanded I choose between drowning or having my blood drained. Letting him feed was far less painful, but I was worried about the baby, so I had to choose being thrown in the ocean. For most of the day he tortured me with the water. And between he would feed. Either punishment pushed me to the brink of death, but he would always force me back to life. Sometimes I genuinely wished he'd let me die. But Lisa Lisa and the baby inside me kept me alive. I wanted to survive. I had to survive. I would do anything to survive. Before the sun set all traces of my identity had been destroyed, and without even seeing Dio Brando once throughout this whole ordeal, I even agreed to marry him."

"No matter what I did I could not please him. The fear was so overwhelming I nearly vomited every time I heard his voice, but he'd drop me in the water if he noticed, so I had to put my face underwater and throw up as quietly as I could. Dio's punishments and assaults continued. I was not allowed to rest safely in the box. I became dehydrated, and then sunsick. I was running a fever, unable to think, unable to understand what was happening to me. I didn't even know who I was. Dio had denied me everything. When the sun sank below the horizon, Dio opened the lid of the box, and appeared before me. He'd been sipping my blood since sunrise, and his burns had almost completely healed. His skin and hair were glossy, and against the clouds of dusk he appeared to be a very handsome man indeed. My eyes did not see Dio Brando, but someone who owned me completely. I was his toy to do with as he pleased. There was a part of me oddly proud that my owner was so beautiful. His strange power held me just above the surface of the water. Dio looked down at me, and smiled. 'You're wet, filthy, ugly, and good for nothing but your blood. While I allow you to live, give me all the blood you have. You don't have my permission to die.' Beneath that crimson sky, I at last saw Dio for who he was. My mind finally realized the man standing there was Dio Brando. And I remembered. I was Erina Joestar. My maiden name was Erina Pendleton. And I realized one other thing. During the day, when Dio had been placing me under his control, I had wondered if he desired me as a woman, but of course he didn't. He was Dio Brando. Even when he'd been rough with me to tear Jonathan and me apart, he had never actually cared about me. He had simply been trying to isolate Jonathan Joestar. I had simply been a tool, a pawn to make that happen. Even now, he had not broken my spirit because he wanted me. He didn't care about me. Not ten years ago, and not now."

"Sitting on the lid, Dio used his mysterious power to bring me closer to him, and turned me upside down, dangling in the air. 'Give your new husband a kiss,' he sneered. 'Of your own free will. Make it a good one and I might give you water and food.' No sooner had the words left his mouth than my hand shot out and slapped him across the face. I scarcely even knew that I was smiling. 'I can't do that. There's no muddy water to wash my lips with.' ...I will refrain from explaining what I meant by that, but resisting him like this, as strung out as I was, seemed to catch Dio off guard. He looked surprised, and did not react immediately. It was but a moment, but I had time to think. He was the same man he'd been ten years before. His core hadn't changed. He was doing the same thing. Repeating what had happened ten years ago. He was dominating me to isolate Jonathan Joestar, to make him feel powerless. He wanted Jonathan Joestar to see what he was doing to me. So Jonathan Joestar must be close enough to see me. Dio Brando had been a vampire without a body. He'd stolen Jonathan Joestar's body. So what had happened to Jonathan Joestar's head? Had he left it on the exploding ship? With his obsessive nature? Of course not. He would have taken it with him, and then humiliated his wife in front of it. That was the sort of monster he was. And he had the power to keep Jonathan alive, even as a severed head. Dio Brando was a vampire, and he'd turned the ship's passengers into living corpses. He must have done the same thing to Jonathan. He'd turned him into one of those horrible monsters from the ship. This thought made me shake with sadness and fear, but it also gave me strength. I took my eyes off Dio, and looked around me, trying not to betray my intent. There were any number of ship fragments floating near us. The waves had not drawn them away. This seemed odd – odd enough. Was Dio's strange power keeping them here? He wasn't just keeping them in case he needed a fire. If he wanted that, he could have moved a number of them into the box, or used his power to pile them on top of the lid, and let them dry. I had watched

him lighting the wet wood, and it took a considerable amount of time. So he wasn't keeping them floating here for use as firewood, but to hide something underneath. Just as Dio had hidden beneath the box. I looked again, searching for something large enough to hide Jonathan's head. But before I could find it, Dio reached his hand out, and wrapped it around my throat. 'Your tongue is sharp, Erina Joestar. Heh heh. So be it. The night has just begun. I can take my time, and let you know just how dull you are, and just how pathetic your violent outburst was.' I stared at him in silence, thinking. A few moments ago I had been so terrified of him. But not any more, not now that Jonathan was at my side. Jonathan Joestar was here with me. That thought alone made me myself again. It didn't matter if he was a monster, or the living dead. Jonathan was Jonathan. My husband. I would not allow myself to grovel before another man with him watching. I knew that Dio would continue to torment me. Even if Jonathan had become a monster, if any trace of humanity remained within him, he would not want to see me treated like this. But he had no way of escaping...unless somebody allowed him to die. As his wife, that was my duty. This was an awful thought. But I felt certain Jonathan would not be able to bear turning into one of those ugly monsters I'd seen on the ship. So my first order of business became escaping from the grip of whatever power kept me suspended in the air. That was easy enough, as long as I could bear the pain. When Dio had this power throw me into the ocean, it often left me to my own devices. Especially if he was sure I was too exhausted to swim. My spirit might have returned, but the fear was still very strong; it was all I could do not to tremble or throw up. But I managed to look calm long enough to say, 'Hold your tongue. You are no longer human, and have no right to speak that way to me.' Dio's grin vanished. 'Not that you had any right to speak to me when you were human. You spoke and lived and behaved like a gentleman on the surface, but you never were one. You have an inferiority complex about your impoverished origins, and that prevents you from improving yourself as a human. Let me

tell you, Dio Brando. Your poverty did not make you a villain. Your relationship with your parents did not make you what you are. Lack of education or wealth had no bearing. You were doomed by your own inability to look beyond the surface of anything, by your shallow mind, and by your overwhelming self-importance."

"As I spoke these words, I realized I wasn't just trying to make him mad. I meant every word, and genuinely believed I was speaking the truth. And Dio's reaction made it clear I'd touched a nerve. For several moments, he remained shaken. Then he yelled, 'Shut up, you bitch!' and used his mysterious power to shove me under the water. When I had almost drowned, it yanked me out. He yelled at me again, and shoved me back under so hard I almost passed out when I hit the water. But I could not afford to lose consciousness here. I desperately shook off the blackness, opened my eyes underwater, and looked for Jonathan. But there were so many bubbles around my body I could barely see. As soon as the bubbles began to thin, I was yanked out of the water. Dio's fury – or rather, his consternation – was tremendous, and I was in and out of the water, swallowing it and coughing it up so fast the water coming in and the water coming up met in the back of my throat and formed a whirlpool. I had no choice but to endure it, though it was hardly endurable. But I had to keep myself conscious and alive. I nearly suffocated on the sea water and vomit, but just before I did, Dio's power let go. I was flung a good ten meters away, and hit the water with a thunderous splash, and sank into the churn of the ocean. As I cleared my throat, I caught a glimpse of something under the debris near the box. My husband's head, Jonathan Joestar's head, bobbing up and down. It was far away, and I couldn't make out what kind of monster he'd become, but peering through the murky waters, I knew I had to do my duty as his wife, and kill my husband."

"I knew this was my one and only chance to act. I had to do it while I was far away from Dio and the box, before he noticed what I was up to. My body and mind could not take much more torture; I would not physically be able to act much longer. Further violence would almost certainly lead me to lose myself again, become Dio's toy again, and allow myself to suffer all manner of indignities with Jonathan watching. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. So I surfaced, coughed violently, emptying both stomach and lungs, and then pretended to faint, allowing myself to sink beneath the water. I knew Dio would not pull me out immediately, and I guessed he was so angry he would leave me to drown until the last possible moment. Once I was a few meters below the surface, I began to swim as fast as I could. I was never the best swimmer, and my dress was heavy and made it hard to move at all, but I thrashed my legs and arms with all my might, desperate to reach Jonathan and kill him. At last I reached Jonathan...and my resolve proved to be for naught. Floating beneath the remains of the ship, in water still tinged orange from the sunset, was the head of my beautiful, beloved Jonathan Joestar – not a monster, but looking for all the world like he was still alive."

"No matter what he'd become, after a day in the water, I expected the head's flesh to have decayed, his skin nibbled away by fish. So this miraculous sight made me gasp. I was transfixed. I had been so focused on laying my monstrous husband to rest....and he not only wasn't a monster, he didn't even look dead. Hesitantly, I reached out my hand, and touched Jonathan's head. The living corpses on the ship had growled furiously, attacking anything living indiscriminately, but Jonathan's eyes remained slightly open, not looking at me, not trying to bite me, not moving at all. I took him in my arms, and held him close, feeling the softness of his hair against my cheek. My husband was so different from what I'd expected that

I lingered too long, and Dio's mysterious power found me. It grabbed me by the collar, and yanked me out of the water. 'You knew Jonathan was down there?' Dio roared. 'You fool! Do you want your husband to eat you!?' This, and the panic in his voice surprised me, but Jonathan's head was cradled in my arms, smiling gently, saying nothing. He did not seem like he would ever attack me. Perhaps even more surprising was that Dio tried to yank Jonathan away from me, as if trying to rescue me from him. 'No!' he yelled, and that invisible hand of his tried to snatch Jonathan from my arms. We struggled for control of him for a moment, but he soon stopped trying. The hand let go, I got my arms back tightly around the head, and then I turned around to find Dio staring at Jonathan. 'What's going on...?' he whispered. Clearly, Dio found Jonathan's condition as surprising as I did. I could never have killed Jonathan with him still looking this beautiful, but from Dio's reaction, it seemed I might not have to. The relief was so great I nearly fainted. But if I fainted, there was no telling what Dio might do to Jonathan, so I persevered. Dio set us down on the lid of the box, where he and Lisa Lisa stood. 'Jonathan...how long will you pursue me? How long will our fates remain entwined?' he muttered, glaring at Jonathan's head. I knew the danger was not yet over; indeed, Jonathan's arrival had sent Dio into a fit. 'I won't allow it! He'll get in my way again! I can leave no part of him! Erina Joestar! He's already dead!' I knew I had to protect my husband's head until this passed. I grabbed a piece of driftwood, and turned to face Dio. 'I won't let you touch Jonathan!' I cried. I put the sharp end to my throat, and stabbed it into the side of my neck, piercing my jugular. As a nurse, I knew this wound was fatal. I had dug deeply to ensure it would be. I drew the jagged piece of wood all the way around, across my wind pipe, and opened the other vein. I needed to release a great quantity of blood at once. Blood filled my vision, spraying out in arcs. I could feel it coating my shoulders, warm, and wet. Good, I thought. The wound had to be deep enough to kill me instantly. Dio screamed. 'What are you doing!?! You stupid bitch!'

Heh heh heh heh. I'm pretty sure I laughed out loud. He was so predictable. I knew it. I knew Dio couldn't kill me."

"The first sign was when he tried to separate me and Jonathan – he believed Jonathan was a monster, and tried to rescue me. Given Dio's obsession with Jonathan, his unnatural fixation on causing him grief, then letting Jonathan eat me seemed like something he would welcome, or at least not stop immediately. But in that instant, he'd blurted out his true feelings."

You fool! Do you want your husband to eat you?

"What with the blood gushing out of my neck, I swiftly lost consciousness, but eventually, I woke up again. Dio had given me blood, and used his mysterious power to heal the wound on my neck. I was woken by the sound of Lisa Lisa crying, and found Dio collapsed next to me. He had injected me with most of the blood he'd drunk, and while he remained conscious, he was as weak as he'd been when he first emerged from beneath the box. Perhaps even worse. This time he didn't even have the strength to take Lisa Lisa hostage. He'd come close to sacrificing himself to save me, and he looked relieved to see me awake again. I first checked the condition of my wound. As far as I could tell, the gash on my throat had been sewn together, the work as fine as any surgeon. Despite myself, I was impressed. 'Where did you learn to do this?' I asked. Slumped against the corner of the box, Dio glanced at me, and rasped, 'In a book. I liked reading. I read all kinds of things, taught myself anything that might be useful.' For the first time, I felt I understood just how alone Dio had always been. Outwardly, Dio had been surrounded by friends, the life of the party. He'd never seemed like someone who would have time to read. But now I

could imagine him slipping away early. His friendships were shallow, for appearances only; alone, he had nothing to do but read. Nothing Dio's ambition granted him was real. He had no one he could share his real feelings with, nothing he'd genuinely accomplished with his own two hands. His life was hollow. This, I thought, was why he'd been so fixated on Jonathan. Jonathan was stuffed full where Dio was empty; he'd grown up to be a man who made genuine friends he could honestly share his honest emotions with, a man who threw himself body and soul into everything he did. Growing up in the same house with that, how could Dio not compare himself to Jonathan? The frustration this comparison caused him was perhaps the one genuine emotion he ever felt. And because he was unused to such emotion, he grew confused, and was driven to kill Jonathan and steal his body. If he wanted to be like Jonathan, he should have just told people how he felt, and made himself a true friend. The life he'd led before joining the Joestars had made Dio Brando who he was, and true friendship was almost certainly an impossibility for him...but Jonathan Joestar was not the sort of man to push someone away just because they'd committed a crime. If he'd allowed his feelings to show, some solution would have been found. Thinking about it, it occurred to me that Dio had been expression those emotions as clearly as he knew how. Hurting Jonathan, trying to kill him – these were a backhanded way of expressing his admiration. Had he felt that for anyone but Jonathan, he would never have admitted it. I had seen the results of their conflict myself, and was seeing it now, here on this little box. One had become a severed head, and I could not even tell if he was alive or dead. The other had become a vampire, and stolen his rival's body, but had given his blood to save that rival's wife, placing himself at the brink of death as well. I hugged Jonathan's head to me, looked over at Dio, and found myself shedding tears for both of them. I was overcome with sadness, grief, and pain. I made no attempt to wipe the tears away, letting them roll down my cheeks. His voice hoarse, Dio asked, 'Are you going to kill me?' 'I will not,'

I said. 'Do you cry because you pity me?' he asked. 'You may have saved my life, but I could never pity you. I just wondered why you and Jonathan had to end up like this, and I couldn't stop myself.' 'It was fated,' Dio said. 'Does it have something to do with the way to heaven?' I asked. He made a face. 'You heard that? Damn it...if I could kill you I would.' 'Is not killing me a condition for getting to heaven?' He did not answer. Instead, he said, 'Do you know what blood is?'"

"When I did not answer, Dio said, 'Blood is power, Erina Joestar. Make blood to live. This is good for me. And what is good for me is good for you.' Dio knew. He knew the wicked thought that had entered my head when I held Jonathan in my arms."

Her long, long story drawing to a close, Mum looked at Lisa Lisa.

"I could have killed Dio Brando there and then. But I didn't. When the night ended, I put Dio in the bottom compartment, and when a ship rescued us, I had them weigh the box down and sink it. This is my sin. I could not kill Dio. Even though I would have killed Jonathan if he'd been a monster. You see, I had hope."

Hope?

What part of this story led to hope?

Lisa Lisa's face was grim.

"Not hope that Dio would regret his actions and become a better person. That man is incapable of such a thing."

Then what kind of hope?

Mum turned to look at my father's head.

"But as long as Dio is alive, then Jonathan's body is too."

I felt a bolt of electricity run down my spine.

Her eyes looked on my father, Mum said, "Jonathan is not dead. And I did not want to lose the chance to get his body back. I

believed that day would come, and I've been waiting here in the hope that it would."

This was why Mum had stayed living in the Canary Islands, never returning home to England. She wanted to remain with father's head, near the sea where his body slumbered.

But this also meant the vampire Dio Brando was still alive. And...the only way anyone would ever get a chance to get father's body back was if they faced him directly. Even if he was locked in a box, on the brink of death, he was a vampire; and from what Mum told us, even without moving his body, he had some strange power that allowed him to do all manner of horrible things to her. He seemed incredibly dangerous.

"Mama Erina," Lisa Lisa said. "This mysterious power Dio had...it seems to have shown up when he stole Jorge's father's body. That's not a power vampires have, and he didn't do anything like that when he was fighting Jorge's father."

"Then you're most likely correct. That first night, when Dio was outside the box, he seemed very confused. That might have something to do with it."

"Mm. Um. Powers like that...some people are born with them, and others get them after something dramatic happens, an injury or the like. The Hamon masters call these Spirit Hamon, or Stands. A strange name, but people with this power can see the power standing next to them, like a ghost. So...I don't think Dio was just confused that night. You make it sound like he tried talking to it, and tried fighting with it. In other words, he saw this ghost-like thing, and didn't know what it was. Stands often look like people."

Mum was hardly in a position to know for sure.

Her story done, the three of us went upstairs. Penelope looked terrified, and threw her arms around me, refusing to let go.

"So many people died! Jorge, I'm scared. This island is a scary place."

Hunh? I was scared too, and the way Lisa Lisa was looking at us was scarier, but what was scariest was a fire that had broken out in the one church on La Palma, in which seventy people perished. Why they were in the church in the middle of the night, nobody knew. But the doctor who'd treated my wounds had been there, and Lisa Lisa said everyone who'd died there had seen the man with black wings, the man who looked like a moth. And the walls of the burned down church were covered in drawings of a man with giant wings who looked just like their descriptions.

When the sun rose, we went to the church.

"So this is the Mothman..." Lisa Lisa said.

I shuddered. "Don't give it a scary name!"

"I didn't make it up."

Still. I couldn't stop shaking.

Every wall of the burned out church was covered in pictures of the Mothman. Countless pictures. Before the fire had started, everyone there must have been frantically covering the walls in drawings. The very thought sent a chill down my spine.

"These are drawn in the ash from the fire. They were using their own fingers as charcoal sticks. These people had been turned into zombies, and drew these pictures before the fire killed them again."

Even though Penelope was still clinging to me, I'm pretty sure I let a drop of pee lose. Just one, I swear!

"It may well be this happened because we're here," Mum said. "Jorge, let us return to England. You can come too, Penelope."

Eh!? Seriously!?

"Really? I can come too, Erina?" Penelope cried. "I'd love to! Jorge, say I can come!"

"Of course!"

I was pleased as punch. I could finally leave this awful island.

"But are you sure? About leaving father's body?"

"I'm sure when the time comes, we'll be brought together. Whether I'm living close by, or far away. That's the power we have."

Blood is power.

Chapter 6
The Island
島

210 Chaos reigned.

The electric and phone lines had been severed, so there was no TV to watch, and the land lines were useless. But our cell phones were still working. Probably not for much longer, though. Morioh was heading out onto The Ocean, heading south from Japan at the insane speed of 100 knots (180kph) – much faster than most ships could manage. We'd be out of our provider's coverage area in no time. I first used mine to check the news. The anchor said the SDF had scrambled planes to follow Morioh. I looked up just in time to see six of them rocketing towards us. Two were larger transport planes, but four of them were clearly fighters – guarding the transport planes? I supposed they'd scramble fighter planes either way, I thought. Then the lead F-22 exploded.

"Aaah!" we cried, and watched as the fire spread out flat. Like it was exploding against an invisible dome ceiling...which I guess it was. There was a dome up there. The burning plane slid up along the dome moving southwest, then slowed. For a second it stopped right above us, then began sliding down to the southeast, bits of it spiraling off to either side. The trail of it made the shape of the dome clear. The other five planes managed to pull up in time, and avoided crashing into the dome. The burning plane hit the water with a splash, but that was soon swallowed in the wake left by the great ship Morioh as it sailed across the water. The wake churned outside the walls of the dome – did it wrap all the way around underneath?

211 "Is this a Stand?" I asked Rohan.

"I don't know. I've never seen or heard of a Stand this large. The whole town's an island! Stands, you see, belong to a person. They're a person's individual power. There's a limit to what even the best of us can accomplish. We all have our limits. Right? Or is my faith in limits betraying my own mediocrity? Damn it! I've never been this shocked in all my life! Is this really what mankind is

capable of?" Rohan's answer had drifted into a thought, which had turned into a sort of speech directed at himself, which was alarming. As an artist, I could see why mediocrity would be Rohan's greatest fear, and why he'd want to deny that humans have limits. But this didn't seem to be an idea worth this level of conniptions. We still didn't know what was actually happening. Perhaps Stand Masters knew less about their own powers than they believed, or perhaps they were too ready to assume anything unusual was the result of a Stand. "Perhaps this is more than a Stand," Rohan said. "If so, let us call it Beyond."

"Uh, sorry," I said. "That name's already taken."

"? Hunh? What? It is?"

Authors were frightening. Such synchronicity. Then I had an idea, and asked Rohan about Tsukumojuku. If he found someone dead in his house he must have read them with Heaven's Door. "Tsukumojuku? Of course I took a look, but there was nothing to learn. Once someone dies, their book becomes the kanji for 'death' repeated to infinity."

Behind him, Nijimura Muryotaisu started shouting. "Ah! What the hell are they doing? Jesus!"

212 I followed his gaze, looking up, and saw one of the fighter planes coming back...and firing a missile parallel to the earth's surface.

"Augh!"

But the missile exploded in mid-air, the fire and shrapnel spreading out, flat on one side. Like the plane before it, the missile had hit the side of the invisible dome. They'd simply been verifying the existence of it. If the dome had not been there, the missile would have passed harmlessly through the air over Morioh. The plane that had fired the missile pulled up sharply, avoiding the dome, and flew away.

"Are we protected, then?" Muryotaisuu asked.

"Who knows," Rohan said. "But I don't think this dome is entirely beneficial to us. Look over there." He pointed down the hill, to Morioh Harbor. A chunk of the bay was being moved with the town itself, as part of the 'ship'. A great number of boats had set off from the harbor, headed for the edge of the 'ship.' "They're about to find that out," Rohan added.

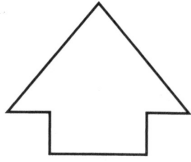
Rohan was right. We all were. Not one of the boats was able to pierce the dome. They'd all had the sense to slow down as they approached the edge, and avoided significant damage to their vessels, but we could see the fisherman clustered at the prow, poking the dome with harpoons. It made the line of the dome very clear. The wakes of the ships crashed against the curve of the dome, a gentle circle encircling the bay.

A circle, hmm? "Rohan, do you have a map of Morioh?"

"? A map? Of course not! But I can draw you one."

"Eh!" Rohan pulled a notepad and pen out of his pocket, and I watched as he went shaa shaa shaa shaaaa, drawing a very accurate looking map. I suppose I had no reason to object.

213 "You still don't trust my power, do you?" Rohan said. "I only need to see a thing one time to produce a detailed sketch from memory. I promise, this is accurate." I took the map, had Hirose fly up and verify the line of the dome in the bay from above, did a little calculating, and soon knew the shape of the ship. The edge was a perfect circle in the water, but followed the winding boundary lines of the town on land.



進行方向



214 It struck me that I'd seen that shape before. It wasn't quite right, but...I recognized it. From where, I couldn't remember.

I racked my brain, but nothing came out, so I went back to my original reasons for making the map. I had a theory. Since the dome formed a circle in the harbor, the circle was centered on something. If this ship was really the work of an individual...

"We have to go here," Rohan said, pointing at the circle. "If this power is centered here, then whoever is moving Morioh will be there as well."

"What's located there?"

"That's our school. Budogaoka Academy," said Nijimura... Fukashigi.

What!?! He wasn't underground any more!?

"Oh! You're okay!" Muryotaisu cried. Behind Fukashigi I saw Sugimoto Reimi, and a disgruntled looking Kishibe Rohan. Wait. There were two Rohans? I turned, but the one next to me had vanished.

The ghost was flesh again.

"Kira Yoshikage has canceled Killer Queen's Bites the Dust effect," Sugimoto Reimi explained. We could finally say the name aloud. "He must have realized that the trap he'd sprung on Rohan wouldn't be enough to eliminate his enemies. Which means he's preparing to fight us head on."

"Why this timing? Unless...is Kira Yoshikage the one moving Morioh?" Rohan asked.

"Hmm...hard to see it any other way. Rohan, all these detectives have been calling you today, right?"

215 "Yes. I got fed up and stopped answering the phone."

"Look what's on TV."

Reimi held out a cell phone, where a group of detectives were holding an emergency press conference. She had found a live stream of it. A row of detectives stood behind a long table with a

white cloth and a number of microphones. The blonde man in the center was holding a mic, and speaking rapidly.

"We have little time, so let's get right down to it. First, some introductions. Including myself, the thirteen individuals gathered here at all known detectives; each has investigated and solved a number of cases, whether police or civil. Some of them I'm sure you know, but I will take the liberty of giving their names anyway. My name is Bariya Choumaru. From the right we have Dezuumi Style, Yuagari Bobohiko, Choukuuji Kenraku, Choukuuji Kiyuu, Judy Dollhouse, Mame Gen, Mikami Nils, Buramai O, Tsukishimoni Nao, Hidzuki, Kakiuchi Mama Jump, and Fuyuname Sayatarou. For the moment, that is all of us. I say for the moment, because it seems likely that more detectives will join the effort to solve the case in Morioh. The case I'm referring to concerns the murders of three detectives: Hakkyoku Sachiari, Nekoneko Nyan Nyan Nyan, and Kato Tsukumojuku. Hakkyoku and Nekoneko were known to be detectives, and it seems likely Kato was as well. If three detectives have been murdered in a single day it seems clear this is an act that flies in the face of justice, of our efforts to unearth the truth and force criminals into the open. I would even go so far as to call it an act of terrorism against the detective profession. We are here to announce that no true detective would ever be swayed by such cowardly violence. This case will be solved. But Morioh has broken off from Japan, and is speeding out into The Ocean, propelled by some mysterious power, and even the SDF are unable to approach it. Morioh has become an island, and the killer is trapped on it. We believe this broadcast will reach Morioh, and we offer first our prayers for the safety of its citizens. We are sure the mayor of Morioh, Shishimaru Denta, is acting swiftly in the interests of public safety and civil order. And there is one other individual I would like to carefully address..."

216 Bariya Choumaru paused dramatically. I'd seen him on TV a

number of times; he was a detective and an Italian chef. I gulped.

"Kira Yoshikage. The detectives here know you were not the one who killed Hakkyoku, Nekoneko, or Kato. We know those three were killed specifically to draw the attention of other detectives; their deaths were bait. The real killer deliberately killed them to put you in a corner, and to make you suffer. So please calm yourself, Kira Yoshikage. At this time we are not looking for you, but for the one who killed these detectives. If you can provide any assistance, our investigation will be over faster, and you will be able to demonstrate that you can be cooperative. We promise no ill will befall you. We promise we will not attempt to find you as long as the detective killer is at large. So please. Calm down."

"Wow," I said, before I could stop myself. How did these other detectives know that name? If they had been drawn to this case by the murders of the detectives, they shouldn't have heard anything about Kira Yoshikage. I knew they hadn't been involved in the fifteen locked room mysteries, but had they all come across his name while investigating unrelated cases of their own? Received a challenge the same way I had, telling them he'd kill them if they came near Morioh? I was pretty impressed they'd managed to work out he was probably moving Morioh without even coming here. They must already know that Stands existed, and know what they were capable of. If they didn't, they would have assumed someone had made a giant engine and fuel tank underneath the town, turning it into a giant ship...whether that was possible was highly unlikely, but they would have started with physical theories, ignoring the possibility of superpowers entirely. But without coming here, Bariya Choumaru had known the truth. I wondered if he had friends who had come here?

217 I was here. Moving alone or in small groups it was very likely that other detectives had reached Morioh before the dome cut it off from the outside world.

Bariya Choumaru had been able to put together a press conference with thirteen detectives on such short notice because those detectives had all been in contact with each other. I'd always operated independently, and never had any contact with other detectives, but there were, of course, people who had no problem working in groups like that.

So if they had friends in town, where were they? Not that I wanted to join up with them immediately, but it seemed sensible to be aware of their location. I remembered what Tsukumojuuku had said.

If several detectives are on the case, and one solves the case before the other does, is the slower one still a detective?

Having that irritating question nagging at my backside the whole time would be a real pain. I would have to find the other detectives, and keep my distance from them so we could avoid bumping into each other.

So, I wondered. The person who'd been bringing all these detectives here and threatening Kira Yoshikage...what did that person make of this place abruptly fleeing Japan?

Could this have been the expected reaction? The more I thought about it the more that seemed possible.

218 If the procession of detectives tormented the explosion killer, if their arrival wounded him...

I remembered what Tsukumojuuku had said.

I've begun to believe that continual, repetitive suffering can lead to the development of unusual powers that help the sufferer escape.

Apparently everyone had only one Stand, but that didn't prevent someone from developing a new power. This thought led me to finally understand why Bariya Choumaru had addressed Kira directly. He knew that if he could ease that pain even a little, if he could make the presence of these detectives no longer hurt him,

then the power driving Morioh might disappear.

He must have detectives posted here, working on the case.

"Can you believe this?" Fukashigi said. I followed the Nijimura brothers' gaze again, and looked up. An SDF helicopter had flown up the invisible dome, and soldiers were rappelling down to the surface of it. It was terrifying to watch.

"I dunno, should I go help?" Hirose said, putting Blue Thunder on his head again. "Nah," the Nijimuras said. "If some kid comes flying up to them they'll just lose their shit. Let 'em be. They're grown men, they know what they're doing."

"I guess..."

"We oughta head to school. If the dude moving the town is there, and it's Kira, we can finally catch him."

"But it's a week day. Summer vacation starts tomorrow. I mean...there'll be students everywhere. None of the students or teachers are named Kira Yoshikage."

219 "Kira's scared shitless with all these detectives here. We just find the guy who looks scared."

"But he's been murdering people here for ages without getting caught. I don't think it'll be that easy..."

Hirose definitely had a point, I thought. And it reminded me of a question I'd been meaning to ask.

"Um, it might be a little late, but how do you all know Kira's name without ever catching him? I just got here, and couldn't actually say his name aloud, so I never got a chance...but how do you know his name? Or that he even exists?"

Hirose answered. "Kira Yoshikage...well, it seems like he had a thing for women's beautiful hands. We had a friend named Yangu Shigetaka – Shigechi, for short – his stand, Stray Dog, could control all the stray dogs in town. One day one of his dogs came back carrying a hand in his mouth – one of the hands Kira Yoshikage had been toying with. The nail polish on the woman's

hand was unusual enough that we were able to figure out where it was sold, and that it had been purchased by a man – which was unusual enough that we learned his name. We almost caught him once. But the first of us to reach him was me, and he was sure he could kill me and escape, so he took the time to explain his Stand name and power. I nearly did die, but the Nijimuras caught up just in time, and turned the tables on him. Just as we almost had him, he slipped away. He forced another friend of ours, Tsuji Aya, to use her power. Her stand, Face/Off, could switch the faces and fingerprints of any two people, so Kira grabbed a random passerby with a similar build, and had her switch their appearances. He stole everything that could identify him. We got there just in time to see the other man and Tsuji Aya explode. He killed Shigechi too, as a warning. So as much as we want to make our town safe again, we also want revenge."

220

"Yeah! We're doing this for Shigechi and Tsuji Aya! If we stop shootin' our mouths off and DO something he'll have to take action! Time to shut up and put up! We gotta go if we wanna get anywhere!" Fukashigi roared, and then was suddenly flung five meters away. Surprised, I looked around. It wasn't an enemy that had hit him, but the corner of the Arrow Cross House. It had spun to the left. If this giant compass had turned, then the ship/island must have changed direction.

I looked up. The soldier hanging from the helicopter had lost his balance, or the island's change in direction had changed the winds over the dome and forced the helicopter off course; either way, the line had been cut, and the soldier was sliding along the dome. Muryotaisu was focused on his brother, but Hirose had looked up too, and saw what was happening.

"Crap!" he said, revved Blue Thunder, and shot into the air.

I grabbed Muryotaisu and pointed. "I'll help your brother, you help him up there!"

"Jesus!" he said, looking up finally. "Gotcha!"

"Cool."

He hopped aboard one of his flying dolphins and flew away, and I ran down the slope.

"You okay?" Rohan called, coming after me. Fukashigi sat up, pushing the bushes out of his way, and muttered, "This house has it in for me..." He was unharmed, but not cause he was tough; he'd used his stand to protect himself. It was sitting underneath him. NYPD Blue was an odd looking Stand; a chubby bald middle-aged man in a suit.

221 "Getcher big fat ass offa me! God damn it!" he snarled. I jumped, taken aback, but Fukashigi was used to it. "Yeah, yeah," he said, getting to his feet. "You're useless otherwise; least you can do is protect me."

"Shut your corn hole, cocksucker. You watch your fucking mouth or I'll rip you god damn head off."

Wow, this thing had a foul mouth. But Fukashigi just laughed him off. I guess it was none of my business. But then he turned and glared at me.

"Who d'ya think you're staring at?"

"Eek!" I quickly looked away. "Jesus!"

"Heh heh. Sorry, man. He's pretty much always in a bad mood. He thinks he's a New York cop. He's convinced I brought him back from America with me."

"Ha ha..."

"That's funny to you, is it, scumbag?" NYPD Blue yelled. I jumped again, the smile wiped off my face. Then Hirose and Muryotaisu came back.

"This is bad! Listen up!" Hirose said, flustered. "We couldn't break the barrier or help at all, but he gave us a message for the

town's leader. Top secret! He said to tell nobody else! Apparently there's some bad people here..."

"So? What was the message?" Fukashigi asked.

"He said if nothing changes, the American army will flip the island!"

"What? I though they were our allies!" Not every day a long coat wearing delinquent discusses international diplomacy, but he had a point.

222 "Back up a minute – why should we believe that?" I said, almost to myself.

But Hirose heard me. "Because of who gave me that message! Look at this!" he said, holding out his cell phone. He'd taken a picture of a soldier holding up a note with "If nothing changes, the American army will flip this island!" written in Japanese by a hand clearly not used to the characters. But the soldier in question was much older than I'd expected, and I'd recognized those blonde curls. "That's..."

"Exactly! The former president of the United States! Funny Valentine!"

It was certainly him. Five people had been president since Valentine, and he had to be more than 80 years old...I was surprise to see him alive at all, much less clearly in good health. He looked much, much younger. "His hair is still perfect..."

"I was surprised too, but it's a wig! He's kept the wrinkles at bay with Botox and plastic surgery, apparently. But that doesn't matter! A former president is telling us this will happen! We have to believe him, right?"

Right, he'd taken the picture as proof. "But why is Valentine here in person? On an SDF helicopter? Putting himself in danger...you'd think he could just talk to the The Funniest directly."

The Funniest Valentine was the first person in history to be named The, and was the current president of the United States. He was Funny's grandson. Funny's son had been named Funnier Valentine, and he'd named his son The Funniest Valentine. Funnier was an astronaut, still in active service at the age of fifty. He'd been on the news a lot recently, since he was the pilot for the first ever manned flight to Mars. I wasn't sure what was going on with the Valentines, but if The Funniest planned to attack Morioh, wasn't Funny's action a betrayal?

223 I looked up. "Woah," I said. "Funny's still up there."

Funny Valentine was having trouble getting back on the helicopter. I could still see him standing up there.

"Pfft, he'll be fine," Rohan said, pointing at the corner of the picture on Hirose's phone. I looked closer, and could just make out what looked like a frogman – small, transparent, standing on two legs. "He's got a Stand," Rohan said. Okay, sure, if he's got a Stand, he'll be fine, we all nodded...then shuddered as the implications of that dawned on us. The former President of the United States was a Stand Master...and Stands were genetic, so the current president probably was, too.

"Ah!" Fukashigi said, so I looked up again. Funny Valentine had just been knocked off the dome ceiling, and was rocketing away when he suddenly stopped in mid-air, no rope or anything; then he began zigzagging through the air up to the helicopter and vanished inside.

"...man, I hope the SDF people are okay," Hirose said. "Hopefully seeing a Stand in action won't lead to them being silenced."

"I doubt the risk would be worth it," Rohan said. "The helicopter pilot is a soldier. Anything happens to him, it'll make waves. I'm sure Valentine's got an excuse in mind. It was over pretty quick, and the soldiers have no way of understanding what

happened."

224

The helicopter flew away. In the distance, we heard a loudspeaker. "This is a message from the Morioh council. In two hours, at 6PM, there will be an emergency meeting. All citizens should gather at the Budogaoka gymnasium. This is a message from the Morioh council..." A council van with a loudspeaker attached was slowly winding its way towards the harbor.

If they were gathering citizens for an emergency meeting, then Mayor Shishimaru Denta would be there too. At Budogaoka High School. That's where we thought the man moving Morioh was. Where Kira Yoshikage was.

"Everything's pointing to the same place," Rohan said. "We should go. There's nothing we can do here but watch my house beat up Fukashigi."

"Shut uuuuuuuup!"

"Will you be okay alone, Sugimoto?"

Reimi smiled. "Thank you, but I'll be fine. Sorry...being a Stand, I can't leave this place."

"We'll go find Kira, take him down, and be back before you know it!"

I didn't think it would be that easy, and Sugimoto looked like she agreed, but all she said was, "I'll be waiting. Try not to do anything dangerous. I'll expect you back in one piece." She was a beautiful girl, and I was suddenly rather jealous.

"How sweeeeeeeeeeeet." "How sweeeeeeeeeeeet." "You're a lucky man, Rohan." Not just the Nijimura brothers – Hirose was making fun of Rohan too. Rohan turned bright red. "Shut up! I was only being polite to my housemate! Come on!"

But something about the warm, fuzzy mood disturbed me. It didn't feel right, somehow. For no reason at all. But I felt like Rohan looked ready to cry. "Um, I'm not actually a Stand Master or

anything, so maybe I should stay here?" I suggested. Rohan looked surprised.

225 "What are you talking about? You're the Detective, you have to solve the case. You have to go after the killer. There's already been a murder here, the police have come and gone, you've arrived, Kira's Bites the Dust was lifted...what else is there to do? It's time for a change of locale, surely."

Things were pointing that way, but...I couldn't explain why I found myself wanting to stay here. "I've got a hunch," I said, grimly.

"Sure it's not just nerves? Stand battles do get rather physical. They are dangerous. But we'll do the fighting; you just work your mind. It seems like you're a real detective. I'm sure you can find Kira for us. I mean...he turned me into a bomb and I still have no idea who he is. Egg on my face, as the saying goes. I'm not proud of that, but I won't let it get me down. I'm fighting back, Joestar."

When he put it like that, I had to go.

"You're a man, ain't ya?" Muryotaisu chimed in. "I don't care if you're English or Japanese, you need to grow some balls! Kira Yoshikage's a scumbag who goes around murdering women! We can't let him live another second! Stop mewling and let's get!"

Fukashigi and Hirose were both staring at me, and even NYPD Blue was grinning and sticking his middle finger up.

"Damn it! Okay. Then...Sugimoto, call me if...oh, you can't. Um. Is there any way you can signal us?"

"Yes. I can't stop the Arrow Cross House when it's pointing any way but North, but I can make it spin."

"Then spin it if anything happens!"

"Good, let's go!" Muryotaisu shouted, and summoned the Grand Blue trio. We followed his lead and jumped on their backs.

226 "Right, don't let go! Jacques! Enzo! Johana! Sky Diving! Go Go Go!"

Those must be the dolphins' names. At Muryotaisu's cry, the three dolphins chirped and shot away like rockets. To my surprise, it was much gentler than physics would ordinarily allow; G and centrifugal forces were entirely ignorable. Despite our speed, I could barely even feel the wind on my face. Where I would normally have been unable to open my eyes and have felt the flesh of my face bending out of shape I felt nothing. The dolphins swept down the hill and across the fields, just off the surface of the ground. I wasn't sure if this was just a trait of the species, but the dolphins bounded across the farmland, leaping and diving, laughing all the way. "Settle down, Jacques! Don't let him wind you up Enzo, Johana! This isn't a game!" Muryotaisu yelled. What had taken twenty minutes by cab took two by dolphin – we were already passing Morioh Station. I thought someone was bound to see us, but Muryotaisu led us down deserted alleys, past shuttered storefronts, and through tunnels without any traffic to speak of. This was his territory. Of course, with that van going around, it was likely a good portion of the population was heading for the school, I thought. But Hirose – who was riding the same dolphin as me, his arms around my waist – said, "Something's wrong...when we crossed the tracks I caught a glimpse of the main road, but there was nobody crossing. There was nobody in the roundabout by the station, either. Are the roads so deserted we don't need to hide?" Rohan and the Nijimuras were also looking around, suspicious and worried.

"I guess they're all just super responsive and organized!" Fukashigi said, brightly.

"Reality check, shit for brains," NYPD Blue said. "Look."
He pointed at the temple. It was on fire.

227 By the time we reached Jozenji, the temple had burned to

the ground, and the fire was dying down. The main temple hall, the structure housing the bell, and the living quarters had all burned. We got off the dolphins and moved closer; without even looking inside we were already struck dumb. It was clear the fire had started inside. The walls and pillars that survived were burned on the inside only. But what really got us was the pile of gas tanks outside the closed doors. The air smelled of oil and gasoline. "But why...?" It seemed they had set themselves on fire.

What little the fire had left of the walls and floor were covered in drawings of...moths? Or butterflies? The drawings were done with charcoal. Wait...looking closer, I could see blood, and bits of flesh. Behind me, Hirose and the Nijimuras turned and ran, retching. Outside, I heard the splatter of their vomit on the ground.

"They drew these pictures while they were on fire?" Rohan asked. "But...what were they drawing?"

It wasn't an ordinary moth or butterfly. It had two burly legs, and a large head, with eyes staring out at us. It was hideous, and yet...

"Beautiful," Rohan said. I turned to look at him. "What? That's what I thought," he protested, but that's not what my look meant. I'd felt the same thing.

"This beauty..." Rohan said. "Do you feel it? They all drew so many mothmen...these drawings appear to be some sort of chimera of humans and moths, so mothmen seems apt. But why did they draw so many of them? There are more drawings of the mothman than there are people dead. Why?"

228 The word 'mothman' was oddly terrifying, and I was having trouble getting past it. Rohan kept talking.

"They were trying to get it right. But none of the drawings did him justice, so they had to try again. Using ash and charred flesh from their own burning bodies." I stared at him in horror. "I'm an artist, I can tell. I know what it feels like to fill every available

white space, desperately trying to capture the image in your head. It was beauty they were after, beauty they sought. You remember what I told you earlier?"

Symmetry is the basis of man-made beauty.

Oh. Certainly, the mothman was... "Symmetrical?"

My voice was hoarse. The stench of burned flesh was making me light-headed.

"Indeed!" Rohan said, cheerily. "With their muscles burning, they couldn't stop their hands shaking, but each of them sought the same beauty! In a sense, this is a miracle! A terrifying one, but no less impressive!"

In spirit or in flesh Rohan was clearly a little mad...but I had to admit I understood how he felt.

But I was less concerned with how incredible these events were than how they had come to pass at all.

"Who knows? When Morioh suddenly started moving perhaps they all assumed Buddha was punishing us and gathered here in a panic? Perhaps there's some strange Buddhist sect I'm completely unaware of?"

"No, no kind of Buddhism teaches group suicide or self-immolation," I said, struggling to stay on my feet. If I let my guard down for a second I'd fall on one of the charred corpses. "What happened here must have been some sort of mass hysteria. Anxious people, gathered in a room, the door locked..."

Rohan and I looked at each other, the same idea in both our minds.

There was another locked room nearby, with even more anxious people gathered in it.

229 We turned as one, and ran out of the temple.

"I don't how you could stand it in there," Muryotaisu said, wiping vomit off his chin.

"Summon Grand Blue! We have to get to the gym!" Rohan

cried.

The urgency in his tone was such that Muryotaisu didn't question it; in a flash, the three dolphins hovered in front of us, and we spend off so fast we nearly left Hirose and Fukushima behind.

"If you want anyone in town to survive, hurry! Don't worry about being seen! Get us to the gym as fast as possible!"

"Rraaaaaaahh!" Muryotaisu roared, and the dolphins sped up, no longer bounding across the ground, rocketing towards the school. We reached the school grounds in a few dozen seconds, crossed the sea of cars parked outside, and reached the gym to find a few thousand people pouring gasoline on each other. They were all muttering under their breath. No one was giving directions. They glanced in our direction, but saw nothing – even though we must have appeared to be hovering in mid-air. Listening closer, I could make out what they were saying.

"Scared scared...."

I shivered – instinctively, I knew I could not afford to listen to them for long. We began shouting, trying to drown out the muttering. "Stop!" "What the fuck!?" "Please, stop that!" "Don't kill yourself!" Nobody heard. It was as if they were possessed; nothing we did stopped them from preparing for suicide.

230 Rohan was yelling, "Heaven's Door!" over and over, turning

them into books, but getting nowhere. "Damn it! All of their books are filled with the word 'scared'! There's no white space left for me to write any orders! What now, detective!?" What could I do?

Alter the conditions.

Scared people gathered in a locked room, preparing to set themselves on fire.

It was hard to make them stop being scared. But we could break the locked room.

"Can we destroy the gym?"

"The dolphins and I can break windows," Muryotaisu said, as if it was a bad idea. He went ahead and started doing just that. The sound of shattering glass filled the air, but broken windows wasn't enough, and the townspeople kept pouring gasoline on each other. Fukashigi and NYPD Blue were helping break windows, but it was taking too much time. They were about to start the fire.

"Leave it to me," Hirose said. I turned to find him on the ground, with Blue Thunder spinning up. A moment later he was at the ceiling. "Watch out for falling rubble! It's better than burning to death, right?" he yelled, and the size of his Stand's propellers abruptly increased until they filled the entire gym. They they started spinning faster. Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrooom!

231 His Stand was no longer helicopter blades; it had become a giant shredder. It tore apart the walls, and the ceiling fell, but as it passed through the blades it was torn to tiny pieces. Hirose had both hands held out, with more propellers on them, blowing the fragments to each side of him, sending them hurtling out the windows the Nijimuras had broken. It was over in no time. I looked around, and some of the people were looking at us. Not all of them yet, though – with the walls this high, it was still almost a locked room.

"Hirose!" I called. "Get the walls! As low as you can!"

"OK!" Hirose said, and shot me a thumbs up, then tilted his

giant propeller slowly forward, quickly demolishing the front wall of the gym.

The evening light streamed in, picking out the heavy dust in the air. Almost everyone turned to look.

The locked room was gone.

"What...?" "Gasoline? Why...?" "Ugh, it stinks!" "This is bad!" People had come to their senses as last.

Everyone but Hirose wound their way through the crowds, calling out. "For your own safety, please step outside, and wash off the gasoline." Their heads clear, people nodded, and began heading for the drink fountains, or the pool, or the shower rooms. Nobody panicked; there was no struggling or running. They weren't scared any more.

Just as I was about to relax, Rohan asked, "Did you see anyone who might be Kira Yoshikage?"

I had completely forgotten about that. Unfortunately.

232 "Come on, detective! That's our main reason for being here! Stop gawking and think!" Man, he could be kind of a dick sometimes, I thought. He kept talking. "Not just think, look! Take a good look at everything. Almost everyone in town is here. Think while you look. The question is...what are you looking for? What do you need to see? You know nothing about what he might look like. If you ask me, changing your face and fingerprints to become someone else isn't as easy as it sounds. Kira Yoshikage is thirty eight! You can't just pick someone the same height; they'd have to be the same age, and the same skin tone and build. Kira looked after himself, kept in shape, worked out a fair amount to keep thin. Could he easily take another's place without anyone noticing? A wife or a lover would notice almost at once. And then there's the matter of his occupation. Kira worked quietly in the administrative department of an appliance company, an unobtrusive salaryman job, but he'd been there long enough to get promoted to chief

clerk, so if his new identity was the same age, he would have a similar level of responsibility. Could you do a different job with different coworkers in a totally different position without anyone noticing? I imagine it would be quite a challenge. And then there's your home. If he had a wife and kids, he'd never be able to risk going home the evening he changed identities. His face may look right, but his voice is different, and he'd have no idea what his wife and kids' names were. And even more practically, he wouldn't remember what they'd talked about that morning. That would certainly arouse suspicion. But these problems are all ones a delicate, careful type of psychopath like Kira would have been well aware of, and taken care to avoid. Yet he used Tsuji Aya's Face/Off to replace someone else. Which means he must have believed this was someone he could easily replace."

Mm, this logic seemed sound. "So?"

"If you look at the whole thing backwards, you'll see how Kira got past all the problems I just mentioned. He had to have known his victim's body, work, and family wouldn't pose a threat. Those are the three things that would be hardest to deal with. To get past the problem of family, you would need someone single, unmarried or at least separated or working far from home. For work, you'd need someone in the same line of work, or unemployed, or you'd have to change jobs immediately after taking over. That leaves the physical end...and if he has no family or job to worry about, that hardly matters any more. You see what I'm driving at?"

233 "Probably. You mean...you can't tell what someone's job is, or what their social life is like just by looking at them."

"Yes, so..."

"The man Kira replaced was someone he knew. Someone he had studied as a candidate to replace. But then...how could he know he'd be able to find this person in time to avoid capture? It

was pure coincidence he wound up fighting Hirose and the others at the tailor's, right? Of course it was. He headed for Tsuji Aya's place...what line of work was she in?"

"She could exchange people's body parts, remember? Her line of work was hardly legal. She wasn't a bad girl, but she walked a very thin line. But officially she ran a beauty parlor. It was called Cinderella."

"So he would have had to grab someone he could replace on the way to the beauty parlor from the tailor's, right? But Kira was a very careful man."

"He was. That lay at the root of his cursed luck. His intense focus forced fortune and coincidence onto his side."

"Hmm. That's one way of looking at it, but if Kira knew what Tsuji Aya's power was, then he would definitely have laid plans in case he needed to make use of it."

"I agree."

"Yet, he could never know when he might be in that sort of trouble. Hmm. There's only one way I can see to eliminate coincidence as a factor."

234 "Eh? What would that be?"

"Simple. Make sure this candidate was always at Tsuji Aya's side."

".....! I see!"

"Beauty parlors rarely have male employees, though; what with all the changing of clothes."

"But she did! He only helped with her secret business, though; more of a gigolo, really. I have no taste for such gossip, so I never met the man, but Yamagishi said he was middle-aged, but not bad looking. Yamagishi is Hirose's girlfriend."

"What happened to him?"

"No idea! But he would have worked perfectly for Kira's needs. Gigolos have no real family, and no real job. Stealing his

body would have been no problem at all! We'd better start by investigating that man. Standing here watching people won't get us anywhere – I have no idea what that man looked like. Kouji!" he yelled shrilly, stalking away.

A tall man in a suit despite the heat came over to me.

"Thank you, thank you. I'm Shishimaru Denta, the mayor of Morioh! That was a very close call, and you have my gratitude!" he intoned hoarsely. His suit reeked of gasoline.

"Oh, it was nothing. I'm glad everyone's safe."

"I really have no idea what we were thinking! I didn't dump this on myself, you know! My own secretary poured it on me! Terrifying! My right hand tried to burn me to death!"

235 "You poured gasoline on me, sir. I could say the same," said a thin man standing behind Shishimaru. He was soaked through, as well.

"Either way, it's dangerous, so wash that off," I said. "No telling what might set this place off."

"Of course! We've called the fire department. By the way, how is it you can fly?"

"Eh? I can't fly!" I said. Then again, I supposed I would have looked as if I was. Either way, I was better off not admitting it. "You were hardly yourself. You must have imagined it."

"No, no, I'm sure of it! You came flying in and saved us all!"

Talking to this man was like having hot air blown in your face, and I'd nearly forgotten I had a message for him from Funny Valentine. But I wasn't the one who'd been given the message...no, this was no time for quibbles! And there was one more thing I was forgetting.

"Mayor, on our way here we found a lot of people dead in Jozenji. I believe what almost happened here happened there."

".....! Good lord...Is that...?" Shishimaru stammered. His secretary tapped him on the shoulder.

"Kumoi's here."

Shishimaru followed his secretary's gaze, and scowled. I turned to look, and saw another tall man in a soaking wet suit – this one with very thin arms and legs. He was surrounded by other men in suits, and they were hurriedly leaving. "Eh? What, was he listening?" "The chief of staff's boy was." "Really!?" Kumoi...oh, his opponent in the election. The election car had been blaring the name. Kumotaku. Now that they'd returned to their senses, the lot of them were immediately turning their attention back to the election. I had no idea how effective rushing to the place where people had died and making a scene would be...no, I suppose I did. In a town this small, the leader would be blamed for any tragedy at all. Those that had survived here were hardly out of danger yet, and there could well be others in danger somewhere else. At this point, a thought struck me.

236 The others.

When we left Arrow Cross, the van telling people to gather at the Budogaoka gym was heading slowly towards the harbor. People from the harbor would not have been able to reach the gym faster than us. Possessed by that unnatural fear, the gym was hardly the only place they could be affected. Like the people in the temple, it would take hold anywhere a large number of people could gather.

Was there something like that in the harbor? From what I'd seen, it was all little shops and inns. But on the hill, right next to us, was the ideal building.

Arrow Cross House.

I ran out of the shattered gym, and look towards Arrow Cross. But there were houses in the way, and it was too far to see.

"Hirose! Nijimura!" I called. Fukashigi showed first. "What?" he said, running over. But he couldn't help me. "Muryotaisu!"

"What the hell?" Fukashigi said. Muryotaisu came running

up behind him. "What?"

"Check on Arrow Cross!"

"!? Sure!"

He bounded aboard a dolphin, and shot up into the air. Shishimaru came running after us. "Ah! I knew it! You kids can fly!"

I ignored him. Muryotaisu glanced down at us, then fly off towards Arrow Cross without another word. The other two dolphins came down to us. "Fukashigi, come on!" "Right!" He must have seen something wrong. Fukashigi agreed, and the two of us jumped onto the dolphins. The dolphins fly away. "Heeeeey! What's going on!?" Shishimaru yelled.

237 I could see it now; the Arrow Cross house was rocking from side to side. The signal we'd agreed on. We'd noticed too late!

The dolphins were traveling even faster than before. There was no air pressure or vibrations, just the overwhelming sense of speed, the scenery blurring past so fast I imagined I could feel the inertia and the wind on my face, and nearly fell off. I grit my teeth and tried to keep my fingers from slipping off the dolphin's fin, and at last we reached the Arrow Cross house. I could smell gasoline, and see the empty tanks everywhere. I didn't see fire.

"Sugimoto!" I called out. Fugishigi and I jumped down, and burst into the house to find it empty. I went through the West sunroom into the study, but found now burned bodies, no signs that anyone had been here; it was the same as we'd left it.

"Hunh?" We looked at each other, confused. "Over here!" a voice called. Muryotaisu had Sugimoto cradled in his arms.

"You okay?" "What happened!?" We called, running over. "She's unharmed," Muryotaisu said. "Just in shock. People from the harbor came up, hell bent on burning the house down."

As a Stand capable of moving this house – or its predecessor, the Cube House – that must have felt like they were trying to kill her. "But what happened to them?"

"They're all under the house. Reimi stuck them all down there."

238 Oh...so Arrow Cross moving wasn't an SOS, but a result of the battle! Relieved, I flopped down on the floor. "I thought my hunch had come true," I said, still unsure why I'd had the hunch to begin with. Was it detective sense speaking? But it really did seem to be just some vague, baseless anxiety. If only had I some context to tie it to...anything like that. Context?

The order of events.

"I'm gonna put Reimi in her bed. Can you stand?" She couldn't even answer, so he shifted her weight till he could carry her in his arms, and headed out the West door of the study.

"Even so...what's happening to my Morioh?" Fukashigi said, and stomped out the East door.

Suddenly exhausted, I laid back on the rug the desk rested on, and felt a strange lump under my back.

What could it be? A small depression, but it felt hard... I peeled the rug back, and found a door.

A door in the floor.

I moved Rohan's desk aside, rolled up the rest of the rug, and exposed the entire door. It was a rectangular door, hidden in the middle of the interior hall. How would anyone know it was here? The front of the door was covered in the same carpet as the rest of the room, and the doorknob was recessed; to turn it you had to hook a finger in and pull it out. The thing under my back had been the small groove your finger went in. It was sheer chance I'd found it at all.

239 If I opened this, would I see beneath the Arrow Cross, where all the people Sugimoto had hidden there lay piled on top of each other? It didn't seem likely.

For one thing, this door opened outwards. There was no gap between the bottom of Arrow Cross and the ground; the whole point was to keep air from getting to Rohan and Fukashigi. There should be no way a door could ever open downwards...and yet, here was a door that did. Where could it lead?

I made up my mind, turned the knob, and let the door fall inside. It opened. The door fell into an empty space that should not exist. Inside was a space exactly the same as the study.

Rohan's desk and the carpet were nowhere to be found, but it was otherwise an exact copy of the room I was in. I was looking down on it from the middle of the ceiling. On the floor below me I saw another door. Did that open to another room below?

I stuck my head through the door, and looked around the room below. There were doors on all four sides, the same as the ones in this room that led to the sunrooms. But there was no way this room could exist in the Arrow Cross.

So this wasn't the Arrow Cross House, but a room in the Cube House. Only the surface layer had changed into the Arrow Cross House; the Cube House still remained within.

The laws of physics did not apply to Stands.

So of course I wanted to climb down into that room, which meant I had to think. I didn't have a rope. I wondered if I could weigh the rug down with the desk, lower myself a meter or two with that, and then jump the rest of the way...but it looked a bit too far, and I didn't think the desk was heavy enough. Then I had an idea. "Jacques, Enzo, Johana!" I called.

240 I waited a moment, and sure enough, one of the dolphins came swimming through the air towards me, clucking. The one I'd ridden both times before. "Jacques?" "....." "Enzo?" "....."

"Johana?" "Kikii!" Bounce, bounce. She did a circle around me, and then a flip. "Johana, can you give me a ride down there?" "Kikii!"

She slid through my legs, and immediately plunged through the door. I quickly jumped on. I let her carry me around the room below for a few minutes. Up and down, around and around like a Merry Go Round. Then I tapped her side, and said, "Okay, put me down. "Kiiigo!" she squeaked, and landed as lightly and quietly as a paper air plane. She began circling the room again, which was adorable. I wanted to keep her, but she wasn't my Stand, and asking Muryotaisu for her would just make him mad.

The carpet on the floor was the same as the one upstairs. I bent down, pulled on the knob on the new door, and opened it.

There was another room below. It, too, was identical to the study. There was yet another door in the floor. "Johana!" I called, and had her take me down again. I opened this door too, and found another copy of the study. I had Johana take me down again, into the third room down from the original study, and opened the door in that floor, and found another room below that. But this wasn't a new room. I'd seen it before.

It was the same room as all of them, but this one had Rohan's desk. It had the rolled up rug, and the door in the floor was open. I was looking down from the ceiling, but I could see another door through the door in the floor, and that door was open too, and beyond that I saw a dolphin fly past, and in the room with a dolphin I saw someone.

241 Me.

I was crouched over an open door, looking down. Through three doors like the one I was looking through I could see the back of my own head four rooms below. I looked up. Beyond the door in the ceiling I'd just come through, and beyond the one beyond that, I could see someone in a door I'd never noticed before, a door in the ceiling to Rohan's study. Still looking up, I waved, and so did

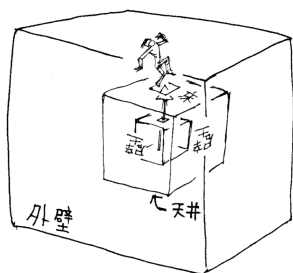
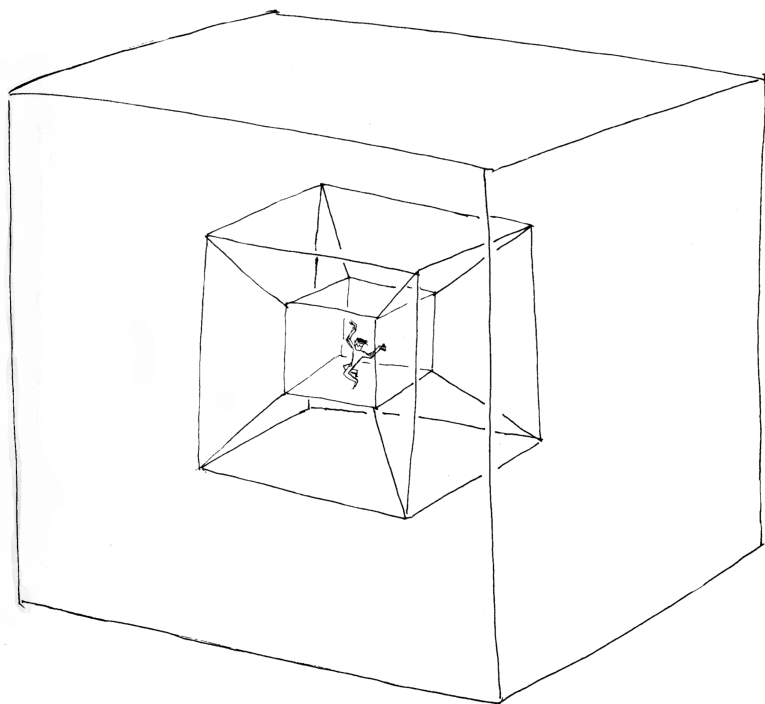
the person four floors above me.

It was me again. I was above me and below me. It was like standing between two mirrors. Leaving the door open, I stood up, moved over to the door to the east, and opened it. I'd assumed it would lead to a sunroom or the hall leading to the sunrooms, but to my surprise, it was neither; just another study. Ah ha. I went to the middle of that room and of course there was another door in the floor. I bent down and opened it.

It led to Rohan's study, but to my surprise, did not open a door in the wall, but a door in the ceiling.

This was a habitable tesseract.

《テッセラクト構造のキューブハウス》



中にある人間には
キューブハウスの外壁の裏(内壁?)は
認識できない。

The house that stood here before this one was a simple square building. But this was also bizarre, in that it had no windows or doors, Rohan had said, but of course it didn't have any doors on the outside. What they'd been able to see wasn't the outside of the building so much as the boundary between it and the world.

The study was a cube, and on each of its six sides – in other words, the four walls to the north south east and west as well as the floor and ceiling – there was another, identical cube. Each of those cubes were linked to each other, for a total of eight cubes leading into one another. The furthest cube out turned in on itself and was surrounded by the other seven. This was a tesseract, but the way the space twisted and turned was a logical abstraction, only possible in three dimensions with the power of a Stand. And because this was also a house, even though it was a tesseract it followed a bizarre set of rules that defied logic and physics. Namely:

1. Parallel movements remain on the floor.
2. Doors on the floor always connect to the ceiling.
3. The side doors to Rohan's study do not connect to the next rooms of the Cube House, but to the halls of the Arrow House.

I had climbed three down from Rohan's study, and moved one sideways, and opened a door. This floor door should have led to the side walls of Rohan's study, but it seemed the study had turned to meet me, and I'd opened the door in the ceiling instead. This was inconsistent with physics and unnerving, so I decided to return to the study the way I'd come, shutting the doors as I went.

I closed the door beneath me, and went back through the side door. I'd lost track of if this was the north, south, east or west door, but I shut the door behind me, closed the door in the floor, rode Johana up to the room above, shut that door, rode Johana up again, and closed the door in the floor of that room. One more room above and I'd be in the study again. I was about to call Johana again when a door I had never opened slammed shut.

!?"Who's there?" I called out. No answer. But someone was there. Someone hiding in the next room over from the room below Rohan's study, in the room to the South, a room you couldn't get to directly from the study. Creepy!

"Johana!"

I called the dolphin, and went back up to the study. I hopped off and quickly closed the door. There was no lock. Oh well. I put the rug back, and moved the desk a little from its original position, resting it on top of the door. So that if someone opened the door from the inside the legs of the desk would hit them. If that didn't hurt them, there was a lot of stuff on the desk that would fall off and make a noise, and even if we didn't notice they'd never be able to put it all back in the right place so at least I'd know the door had been opened. The Cube House didn't share any links to the Arrow House other than the study, so the only thing left was the door in the ceiling. I looked up, thinking, but then...

"Hey, Joestar!" Fukashigi yelled, bursting in. I jumped a foot in the air.

"Ah! What? What!?"

"Come on, you gotta see this!"

Wasn't enough happening already? I thought, annoyed, but since I was scared of whoever was hiding in the Cube House I followed Fukashigi outside.

245 "Look at that!"

In the distance, I could see another island, thundering – I couldn't actually hear it, but it was clearly moving very quickly – across The Ocean towards Morioh.

Morioh was not the only island 'ship.'

Nero Nero Island was covered in rocks and was about a tenth the size of Morioh. It had come from just South of Sardinia, the second largest island in Italy.

It was the headquarters of a mafia group called the Passione Family.

SEVEN
Airplanes
飛行機

The English were unpleasant in their own very English way. It was as if they lived at the top of the world, and naturally looked down on everyone else; 'looked down' in the sense that everyone else was clearly beneath them so what else could they do? No spite or guilt, just... 'Why doesn't everyone else try harder?' There was a hint of warmth to their contempt that I found especially deplorable. How could such scumbags sit pretending to be gentlemen, acting as if they made the world spin while sipping tea and discussing the state of the world? If this was the English, the Spaniards back on the Canary Islands were far better. They were cocky and violent but never tried to pretend they were in the right. They never explained to you how their tyranny was based on logical superiority, and besides, if they left the trash to themselves they'd never amount to anything, yes? I'd never realized that true arrogance presented itself as elegance. True class, to my mind, was evident without resorting to pretense.

In that sense, I found no true gentlemen or ladies in the Joestar family's ancestral home, Wastewood. Every single one of them treated our apparent differences as a means by which they could once again justify their own superiority. The Joestar family's recent contributions to Wastewood history had been the slaughter of the head of the family and a great number of policeman by an adopted son, followed by a fire that burned the manor to the ground, and then the surviving heir had married only to die in a shipwreck on his honeymoon. Even once my mother returned, all we got was: Eh? The Joestar girl survived? My, you had a child and lived on your own in the Canary Islands...how sturdy of you. So you've come 'home'? Although you never really lived here, did you? Hmm. Well, that hospital your father ran was handed over to new management quiet some time ago, so you really have no family here at all. It's been a burned heap of rubble for twenty years, I never imagined seeing the Joestar manor rebuilt. Oh, you know the president of the Speedwagon company? He's helping you rebuild, is he? He's a bachelor, and you have two children...it must be tough.

Oh? Really? The girl isn't yours? Not even of noble birth? I see. Well, you're still Pendleton's daughter, and a fine woman...although it's been much too long since your wedding to really reenter society. And your son doesn't seem to fit in at the club. But enough about practical matters, tell us more about life on the island. You must have had so many adventures! My mother just smiled, and nodded, and said that it had all been quite a bizarre adventure, and since staying at home led to nothing but this sort of neighborly assault, she quickly began commuting to London. In the city was the hospital my mother's father had founded, now even larger. Graham Pendleton had retired, and the hospital was now run by someone else, but the controlling interest in the stock was owned by mother and my grandfather, and she had stayed in contact with him the entire time we were on the Canary Islands. My mother started her own company not far from the hospital, effectively transferring the headquarters of the Star Mark Tradings Company she'd founded from the Canary Islands to London. The office back on the islands remained, and additional ships from England increased the volume they could trade; England and Spain being presently engaged in a struggle for control of the seas this arrangement allowed her to play both sides, purchasing goods in Spain to sell in England, leading to a steady increase in profits. Both mother and Penelope, who was working with her, seemed full of life and fun, while I had transferred to my father's old school, Hugh Hudson High, and was being bullied again.

Judging by the number of people who called me *Jorge*, the fact that I was a fallen aristocrat amused my classmates endlessly, but at the same time the economic success my mother had was impossible not to notice locally, and made them all frantically jealous. On top of that it was very easy to make fun of anyone with a single-mother household, and well, quite a number of things were said to me. I never really minded what they said about me; when they couldn't get a reaction out of me they got mad, and one idiot fumbled his way into insulting my mother, which I could not abide.

On the Canary Islands I'd been too afraid to ever get in a fist fight; suddenly I found myself taking three or four at a time, swinging wildly. I lost, of course. Fights are always won by whoever has more people on their side. This was high school; we were all grown up, and our punches and kicks hurt quite a lot. But I was ecstatic. I could finally take a swing at somebody! At the same time, I felt hollow. However slimy my opponents were, they were just high school boys, normal humans; not evil vampires or zombies. My fights were sleepy scraps in a world of peace.

It all seemed so stupid I began refusing to engage with them no matter what they said. Mother told me to ignore them and worried about my injuries, and Penelope was furious and started slurp slurp summoning locked room clowns, so anyone who fought me was in grave danger, but mostly, I just got bored by it all. Fed up. By melancholy, violent, endlessly peaceful days.

I remembered the time I'd spent with Tsukumojuku. All that time spend hunting serial killers, solving locked room murders, getting trapped in mansions on deserted islands...! I missed the adrenaline rush, of course, but what I really wanted was my friendship with him. The ability to talk about anything, to say what I liked, real laughs, real anger...I was sixteen now, and the thought was embarrassing, but I wanted a friend. And it didn't seem likely that I'd ever make one. I'd thought I couldn't make friends on the Canary Islands because everyone was Spanish; but I couldn't make friends with the English either. Because of this I started spending more and more time on my own, and since it was the country, the only place in Wastewood where I wouldn't run into someone I knew was the sea. Since there were steep cliffs along the coast the only person who ever wandered around them was me, and I went almost every day, and that was where I met the Motorize siblings.

At first I thought they were getting in the way of my gloomy cliff stalking. I was staring at the sea and remembering how much I

didn't want to go back to the Canary Islands, when I saw them carrying something with a pair of huge wings, like a giant bird, up to the cliff's edge. Were they going to push it over and make it fly? It seemed a waste to make something like that and then throw it into the sea. Then, to my surprise, the girl wiggled in underneath it, inside of it. Eh? What is she...is she trying to fly that thing? Really? The wind on these cliffs wasn't strong enough to lift more than a leaf, there was no way it would work ah ha ha ha. I was so shocked I started laughing. Before I could call out to her to stop the boy shoved the big construct towards the edge of the cliff...with the girl still inside. He didn't even hesitate.

"Eh? Auuuughhh!"

I ran towards them, yelling, but too late. The tail of the 'bird' the girl was riding had tipped up, and it slipped over the edge of the cliff. She was falling! Shit! These cliffs were at least thirty meters tall; the water was deep, but from that height, she'd be lucky to survive the impact. I had to save her! Hoping to pull her out of the ocean, I ran to the cliff edge nearest to me. I could see the nose of the bird on the surface below. I couldn't see the girl anywhere in the pounding surf. I ran quickly along the cliff edge until I was right above the sunken bird, shouted, "I'll be back for you!" at her killer, who seemed startled by my sudden approach, and with that, I flung myself off the cliff...and as I did, the bird shot past me with the girl still inside.

Both the girl and I said, "Eh?" at the same time. I turned in the air, staring after the girl and the bird, and thought, shit, I did it again. I was always throwing myself headlong into danger without a second's thought. Tsukumojuku used to lecture me about it all the time...but judging by the speed the cliffs were moving away from me I was about to hit the water, and should probably brace myself. Thirty meters. Doable? I thought it was. I stretched my arms up, and did my best to hit the water straight on. I took a quick breath...but just before I hit, the boy from the cliff caught up with me, wrapped his arms around my body, and suddenly we were

speeding along in a totally different direction, along the surface of the ocean. My entire body was still braced for impact, and I had trouble adjusting to this turn of events.

".....?"

"What the hell were you thinking?" he said. "If you'd looked up for one second you'd have seen the glider! Tell me you aren't hurt."

I still couldn't bring myself to speak, so I just shook my head. There were these things on his shoulders dripping with some dark red goo, and they were folding up and stretching out, and were covered in long flat hair, and then they turned and we left the sea and flew up into the air. He had wings...and they were covered in blood. ? Um...? Was he not human? "You OK?" I heard someone shout. Over the bird boy's shoulders I could see the girl I'd tried to save in her bird shaped machine, flying alongside us. "Maaan, you nearly gave me a heart attack ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" she said, laughing hysterically. I stared at her in horror.

"We'd better land," the bird boy said.

"Right, I'll loop around and come in for a landing. You OK, Steven?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, and thank you!" she said, catching my eye.

Eh? What for?

"You were worried about me, right? Heh heh heh, you went running straight off that cliff! Dash and bound! I saw the whole thing!"

.....

"See you on the cliff!" she said, threw me a kiss, and turned the wings of her machine away from us. I had assumed bird boy was her boyfriend, so this set my heart racing for two reasons. But the real reason my heart was racing was seeing that girl flying around in her bird machine, and how it had no obvious form of propulsion but there it was flying up down left right never falling totally free. Even after the bird boy had deposited me safely on the

top of the cliff I stood riveted, watching her fly, obsessed with this new power. "I'm jealous...I want one...!"

"Heh, everyone'll be riding them soon enough."

"Eh? Really? How? Doesn't seem like something anyone could do."

"You can, if you practice a bit. Just like driving a car. Maybe you won't be able to fly like her, but it won't be long before they make ones anyone can handle."

"Like a car...? Then she isn't using some sort of special power to make that thing fly?"

"? What do you mean?"

"I mean, like...like those wings of yours."

"Mm? Ha ha ha ha, no, no. That's just science. No special powers."

"But that thing looks too heavy to fly." It was hardly a leaf.

"It is if you don't handle it right. You've never seen an airplane before?"

Airplane? Was that thing an airplane?

"If air flows under the wings, it pushes them up. Normally they have an engine making a propeller spin and build speed, but we don't have the money or the engineering skills, so the best we can do is make a one-man glider out of wood and cloth."

I got even more excited. If normal people could make something like that then there was every chance I could fly one. If these things were going to be as common as cars, then I would absolutely be flying one someday! Amazing! I would be able to fly! I had been sure I'd just met two more people with mysterious powers, but I guess that wasn't true for the girl! I looked over at the bird boy and he'd folded his wings up and was sitting down. The bleeding had stopped, but the flesh on the wings looked really soft, and what I could see of his back through the holes in his shirt made it clear there was lots of bruising around the base of the wings, and some yellow bubbles oozing out.

Guess this was why the girl had been concerned. He was

clearly *not* OK. "Sorry, this was all my mistake..."

"Mm? Forget about it."

"Looks painful. Very painful."

"Yeah...but I'm used to it, and it'll be fine in a bit. And you...heh heh, you're more surprised by the plane than my wings."

"Eh? Mm. It just so happens I'm used to strange things."

"Yeah?"

"So how'd you end up like this?"

"Um, well..."

"Wait," I said, remembering how Penelope got hers. "If it hurts to talk about, forget I asked."

"Heh heh heh...can't say there wasn't pain involved, but that makes it sound like a much more interesting story than it is. I've never told anyone the story...hardly anyone else has ever seen my wings."

He fell silent, so I didn't pry further. I looked back at the glider. Just watching it brought me joy, and given what Steven had said about the future, I found myself looking forward to what was to come for the first time in my life. I suddenly felt like all sorts of extraordinary things were going to happen.

"Ha ha ha! I'm definitely flying one of those! Absolutely! Positively!"

I heard Steven laughing behind me. "Heh heh heh, well, given how quick you jumped off that cliff...that kinda guts is just what you need to be a pilot."

Guts? Nobody else had ever accused me of having those before.

Steven's sister Kenton came sliding in for a gentle landing on top of the cliffs. We looked the glider over, and except for a few grass stains, it was completely unharmed. While I was busy being surprised and impressed they swiftly broke the glider down, and loaded into the back of their wagon. They gave me a lift, and I

ended up back at their house. At this point it finally occurred to me to introduce myself, and they were both taken aback.

"Ehh!? You're the Joestar boy? Our grandfather was friends with your grandfather! Your grandfather's name was George too, right?" Kenton asked.

I nodded. "But my name is spelled Jorge."

"Oh...but spelled that way, wouldn't you pronounce it Horhe? Don't people call you that?"

"...they do," both on the Canary Island, and here in England. "So?" We'd been getting along rather well...were they going to start mocking me now?

"Do you know a girl named Darlington?"

"Nope."

"Eh? You don't? She's in your class."

"I don't know anybody's name at school."

"I guess you did say you transferred..."

I hadn't said that yet? "Something Darlington?"

"Hunh?"

"What's her first name?"

"Oh, Darlington is her first name. My kid sister. I know, it sounds like a last name. It is a last name, too. Same goes for my name. Dad named us both after old friends of his. Since he can't very well give girls boy's names he gave us their last names. Awful, isn't it?"

".....? So...Darlington Motorize?"

"Yes, our little princess. I'm sure you've noticed her, she's the cutest girl in your class. The one with the curly hair."

".....I don't remember a girl like that."

"Wha...ah ha ha ha ha ha! No wonder she's so mad about it! Thank you so much! Jorge Joestar! Our little princess is getting a bit too vain, and you've been good medicine."

Eh? Eh? So this girl was waiting for us at the Motorize residence?

No matter where you went, someone was there, and they

were connected to someone else; it was just like La Palma. I sighed. "Give her a chance," Steven said. He was sitting on the right side of the wagon, holding the reins. "I agree she's a bit vain, but she's not a bad kid, and she's more than just a pretty face."

I remained unenthused.

The Motorize estate was still properly aristocratic, with a huge garden, a large mansion, and a butler. We rode the wagon straight into the shed; while we were unloading the glider the butler and Darlington Motorize came in.

"I've brought you both some tea," she said. "Oh? Aren't you in my class?"

I took a good look at her, but couldn't say for sure if I'd ever seen her in class.

"What?" she said, somehow looking both anxious and victorious at the same time.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I don't remember you. I'm Jorge Joestar," I said, holding out my hand.

Darlington sulked for a second, but then took my hand. "Darlington Motorize," she said. "This is our butler, Faraday. Give Jorge some tea, too. Oh...Steven, your wings...did Kenton have another accident?"

"Uh, no, that's my fault," I said.

Darlington glared at me. "What did you do? Every time Steven opens his wings it takes him three weeks to heal, you know. He can't go to school that whole time, so you owe him!"

I had not expected it to take that much time. I had imagined it was a momentary thing, like Penelope's Wound. I looked at Steven, and he said, "Knock it off, Dar. Jorge tried to save Ken; he could well have hurt himself worse than me trying. I'm used to it by now, it's fine. Not like we need to call a doctor for it; there's nothing anybody can do to help."

"But it takes three weeks? What about school?" I asked.

Steven laughed. "I don't exactly take school seriously to begin with. I can learn what I need on my own, and it means more

time I can spend on gliders."

"Besides, Dar," Kenton said. "You brought tea out here because you want to know Jorge better. Making Faraday join in your weird little pantomime."

"What nonsense!"

"But you've never once brought us tea before, ever! Ah ha ha ha ha!"

"Hey!"

"Then you pretended not to know his name! 'Aren't you in my class?' Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Stop it! It's all nonsense, I swear!" Darlington shrieked, then she left in a huff, angrily stamping her way through the mud. Kenton watched her go, laughing hysterically. "Ken, knock it off! I'm starting to feel sorry for her," Steven said. "You know she's just going to take it out on Faraday and Dad."

"But she's so cute!"

"It's always like this..." he sighed.

I'd have stayed as far from any of this as possible, but they were his sisters, and Steven seemed hopelessly nice.

Faraday served us all tea, and we drank it. It was delicious. I wandered around their work shed, tea cup in hand. There were plans all over the walls, shelves filled with models, and a pile of glider parts in the back. It was clear he had tried out a number of different body types, and the sheer variety displayed in the plans, models, and parts lit fire to my imagination. "Jorge," Steven said, "Want to help make planes after school? And on holidays. If you're really interested..."

I gaped at him. It hadn't even crossed my mind that he might offer. And there I was going, "Eh...but..." instead of yes yes yes please please please because nobody had ever asked me to join a group before, and I'd wanted a friend like Tsukumojuku but didn't ever imagine myself joining a group and...I was scared. This was so beyond my wildest dreams that it left me petrified. I couldn't believe it was happening. Mouth flapping I eventually managed to

say, "Then once I've proven I deserve to be here!"

They both laughed. "No need!"

But I needed it.

I thought frantically. "Um, there was a sunken glider at the bottom of the cliff," I said. "If you've given up on it, can I have it?"

"Sure," Steven said, "But that's been underwater a while now."

"Yeah. I'll pull it out, dry it off, and look it over. You know why it crashed?"

"No. Kenton said it felt like a bird or something hit it, and then it just fell apart in the air."

"Then I guess my goal should be figuring out why it crashed, correcting that, and making it fly again."

Kenton broke up laughing. "That's a pretty lofty first goal! What, you want to start out by surpassing us? Ah ha ha ha! Sounds good! You don't think small!"

"Oh? Should I go for something a little easier...?"

"Don't even think about it! No taking it back now! Man, I dunno if you're bold or wimpy, but don't worry! We'll help."

So we all took the wagon back to the cliff and pulled the shattered glider out of the water. "Good thing my wings are out!" Steven said. He did almost all the work of getting the glider up; all I could really do was take the pieces from him and load them into the wagon. We took it back to the Joestar manor, and unloaded the pieces in a corner of the garden. There were any number of missing parts; Steve offered to share from his stash, but I refused, hell bent on repairing the glider on my own. I did borrow some documents from him, and began studying them intently, learning as much as I could about airplanes while repairing the glider. The American Wright Brothers were one step ahead of everyone else in aeronautics, and had successfully built a manned propeller plane the year before. Steven and Kenton had been studying wing-warping controls, and the glider I'd seen them fly, Motorizing 7, was the result. The one we'd pulled out of the water was Motorizing

5; Motorizing 6 had been smashed against the cliff face by a sudden gust of wind, destroying it; Steven had been forced to open his wings and grab his sister out of the air.

"Since Steven has his own wings," Kenton said, "He can't really truly get serious about making airplanes. I, however, want to be like Steven, so it's really driving me forward, but I'm always in danger of crashing. So Steven has to stick by me, and seeing him fires me up, and I wind up taking even more risks, ah ha ha ha ha!" Some sister.

The other sister never came near the work shed again, but she was in class, and we talked occasionally. Even if Darlington brought up airplanes I wouldn't talk about them. I had no idea what pranks the other kids might pull, and if their efforts to torment me caused trouble for Steven and Kenton that would be just awful. We had nothing much to talk about besides airplanes, so we ended up talking about novels. Darlington did not seem like a heavy reader to me, but she had almost all the books I'd acquired on the Canary Islands, and offered to loan me books I hadn't read yet. I assumed I'd pick them up while visiting Steven, but she went to far as to set a date and time, and the day in question was when our class ended early but Steven and Kenton were still at school, so I was pretty sure I was going to end up waiting in the parlor for them to get home for ages. I'd yet to set foot inside the Motorize manor, but could easily imagine it not being anything like as fun and carefree as their shed, and I was only really reading novels when I was taking breaks from studying airplanes, and would gladly have given them up if it meant I didn't have to keep talking to Darlington, but she was so insistent it seemed much easier to just go instead of trying to worm my way out of it, so I went.

When I mentioned this the day before, Kenton laughed. "Ahhh, that explains why she keeps borrowing novels from Dad's library and scowling at them! She was making excuses to talk to you!" Hunh?

Steven winced. "Ken! Don't tell *him!*"

"Nah, it's cute! I'm sure she's got a crush on you, Jorge!"

"No way! No way, no way, that can't be right!" I spluttered.

"Why not?"

"Well, she...I mean, I think she's pretty popular with the boys in class, and because I'm the only one not very interested she...winds up trying to get my attention. I'm like the prize of a hunt, and she'll keep it up till she's satisfied, but it's not really me she wants. I can sense it; there's like, a stubbornness there, like Darlington's trying to find the right strategy to get to me."

Both Kenton and Steven looked rather surprised.

"Hunh...aren't you perceptive," Kenton said. "I think you've hit the nail on the head, but...consider me impressed. Boys your age generally get pretty carried away the second a girl like Darlington shows the slightest interest."

"I dunno...I don't have any other friends, so I'm sort of happy she comes and talks to me at all. And since Darlington talks to me, the others are leaving me alone more. I'm sure they'll be back once Darlington tires of her toy."

"Hunh...Jorge, are you already in love with someone else?" Kenton grinned. My thoughts instantly went to Lisa Lisa, to my horror. Why Lisa Lisa!? Why now!?

"No! I'm not!"

"Ah! You're flustered! That means you are! I know it!"

"I'm not! I'm not!"

"You absolutely are! That's nice. I don't know why you think you need to hide it, you don't."

"Because I'm not!"

"You so are! Ah ha ha ha ha!"

At last Steven saved me. "Cut it out! You toy with Jorge as much as Dar does."

She did! Point well made!

"Ah ha ha, well, Jorge is just that type, you can't help messing with him! Listen, Jorge, I know you've had all kinds of bad stuff happen to you, but that was because you were surrounded by

children! Children are all idiots who don't know how they should behave. They want to tease you a bit but wind up being really mean. Because they suck at it. Lots of boys end up being really mean to the girl they've got a crush on, you know. But you're in high school now, so you're about to become really popular. Look forward to it! You're plenty good looking! If bizarrely gloomy."

This caught me so off-guard I didn't know how to answer. I could hear a denial echoing through my mind, but no thoughts formed.

Then Kenton added, "But I guess you won't care! You're already in love!"

I love you, Lisa Lisa.

AAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh! Why did I just think that! I was dying of embarrassment. "I'm not in love! I'm not! Not at all!" I shrieked.

"I've been debating whether to mention this or not," Steven said. "But you live with your mother, and another reeeeeeally pretty woman, don't you?" Eh? Penelope?

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek! Really!/? Eh? Her? Jorge! You're already living together!/? Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooow!" Kenton had clearly lost it completely, and Steven wouldn't stop grinning.

"You're a lucky boy ♡," he said.

I didn't know he had it in him.

This was such a weird thing to say it calmed me down.

"Nothing like that."

Kenton and Steven both went wide-eyed. "Oh!" "Hunh?" "He's telling the truth." "Hunh..." Kenton said. "Then it's someone else he loves! Somewhere else...did you leave her behind on the Canary Islands!?"

Elizabeth Straits was in Rome now, right?

Me too, Jorge. I love you, too.

Ugghhhh, why was she saying that!/? Why was I thinking about her again! Enough! "I'm not!"

"Liar! You just went bright red!"

"I'm not! I swear, I'm not!"

"Ah Ha Ha Ha Ha! The way you can't lie at all is so fun and adorable, Jorge!"

And I got teased mercilessly for it.

That night, in the simple tent I'd set up in the garden in place of a proper work set, I finished putting together the parts of the glider we'd saved (about 70% of it) and it finally looked like an airplane. Looking it over, I noticed two sets of four parallel grooves on top of the right top wing. I couldn't see them as anything but the claw marks left by some four fingered thing that had grabbed the wing, and the location of the marks was clearly where the glider had started to fall apart in the air; one of the wires that warped the wings was severed in just that spot. It spooked me.

Kenton had said she hit a sea bird, but she'd been the pilot and couldn't see the back of the wings. Had something been hiding back there, trying to crash the plane? I didn't want to deal with this alone, so I made up my mind to bring it up when I was visiting the Motorize manor the next day.

A bright morning gave way to heavy clouds and cold rain and I was dreading the whole thing but school ended and I entered the Motorize manor, was led to the parlor, and sipped the tea Faraday brought until Darlington came in with Heart of Darkness in her hand and asked, "Jorge, are you in love with anyone?"

I made a strange, shrill sound and nearly spit my tea but stopped myself, swallowed, and gasped, "No."

"I am."

"Oh."

"....."

"What?"

"Nothing? You...aren't going to ask who?"

"Eh? I'm not asking."

"William Cardinal."

"Don't know him."

"...he's two grades above us. He and Steven know each other. He's quite the athlete, and he's smart, and he'll be a doctor someday, but really, he wants to write novels."

"Hunh."

"So he says your opinion of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is odd. The way you support Heathcliff's revenge; the book itself describes that as a curse, or the work of spirits. He says if you really read that book cackling with glee like you said, then he says you must be very odd yourself."

I had, indeed, totally laughed my ass off reading *Wuthering Heights*. "Go get 'em, Heathcliff! Good work!" But sadly, he wasn't that effective, didn't accomplish all that much, and at the end the author tried to force a happy ending which I'd found highly disappointing. I kinda remembered mentioning this while chatting with Darlington, but... "Whatever the author intended, it's up to the reader how they respond to it. And...not that I've ever tried to write one, but characters in a novel don't always do what the author intends. I've got no problems debating my take on the book with this William Cardinal. But I do question you bringing up his criticism of my take with me, here. I don't mind if you criticize me, but using someone else's words to do it isn't right, Darlington. If you want to criticize me, or talk shit about me, or be mean to me, at least use your own words. I'm sure William Cardinal didn't expect those words to reach me like this, so you're being rude to him, too. Anyway...I'm not going to borrow that book from you. I don't want to deal with you being weird about my take on it again, and if I can't be honest about my opinion, why should I borrow a book from you?" I pushed the book back across the table to her.

"Why are you mad?" Darlington said.

"I'm not mad. Just surprised. I thought we were getting

along, but then you suddenly attack me. If you secretly didn't like me, or weren't happy with what I think, then don't pretend that we're friends. I don't have that many friends, so the last thing I want is to be disappointed by the ones I think I have."

"Hunh. Well, sorry. You can go now."

"Mm. I will."

I stood up, and left the parlor. I ran into Faraday, thanked him for the tea, and was about to leave when he said, "Oh, Master Joestar, a friend of yours was just here, searching for you."

"Eh...? A friend of mine?" I'd just lost one of the few I could call friend, and the other two were Steven and Kenton. "Here? Can you describe them?"

"He looked like a young boy, primary or middle school...he spoke Spanish at first. I led him over here, to the other parlor."

Rain pounding down outside, he led me down a gloomy hallway, across the central hall, and into a room in the other wing. He knocked on the door, and it echoed dully. "I'll take my leave here," Faraday said, and left. Leaving me alone with my anxiety. I peered into the room, and saw nobody inside...? A friend? A Spanish one? Had someone from the Canary Islands come, pretending to be my friend? Steeling my nerves, I stepped through the door. When I saw who was standing in the back, my vision blurred, my legs shook, and my head spun so fast I could barely stand.

"Wha...?" I whispered, feeling myself about to topple.

"You've grown awfully tall since I last saw you!" he laughed a laugh I had not heard since he vanished last summer in the Atlantic Ocean, since the day I thought he'd died – Tsukumojuku. Asian faces did look young to Western eyes, but...ha ha ha, this wasn't really... "How are you...?" How could he have known I'd be here?

Tears welled up in my eyes.

"I exist now in eternity, in the final frontier," Tsukumojuku said. "But I expect I won't be there forever. There must be some

meaning for me to have come here. Like I always said. Everything has meaning. You wanted me here, or something needed me for your benefit. We have no time, my friend. By the way, where is this? There were no buildings this splendid on the Canary Islands." The familiar sound of Tsukumojuku's voice calmed me from my simple-minded emotional reaction, and I felt my mind waking up the way it had during our adventures together.

Look carefully, and think. Tsukumojuku had said these words to me countless times. Look carefully...so I did.

Tsukumojuku was floating about five centimeters above the surface of the floor.

I looked up and met his eye.

"Yes," he said. "It seems I can't really say that I am actually here. I'm not sure if I should tell you...but I'm currently in Japan, in the year 2012. I'm there with a different you – a Japanese boy completely unlike you, but also named Jorge Joestar. I've been transported to a place called the Arrow Cross House, and I've gotten caught up in another case."

2012? That was 107 years from now. Another me? A Japanese Jorge Joestar? Arrow Cross House?

I had no idea what he was talking about but, "You're caught up in a case? Need help?"

"Nah, the other Jorge Joestar's here, I'm sure it'll be fine. Probably. And like I said, I'm not here to get your help. I'm here to help you. Are you in some sort of danger right now?"

? Danger? "No...I mean, I don't have many friends but..." But I had made friends since moving to England. "Basically I'm fine?"

"Oh. Well, that's good. So there must be some other reason. Oh, look," he jerked his chin at his left hand; from the wrist out it

was fading, see-through. "I see. I am Tsukumojuku. I may be in one other place as well," he said, cryptically. Tsukumojuku smiled at me. "I see, I'll need to cross the bridge. Somebody somewhere else has taken hold of my left hand. The palm is small, the fingers thin, so it must be a girl. And she needs you. Take my other hand," he said, holding out his right hand. I reached out to take it, then stopped.

"Why is it you're doing this?"

Tsukumojuku laughed. "Your Beyond is making it happen. I'm sure this isn't a task just anyone could accomplish. For a Miracle like this to occur, you need the Name of God. 'God' is words. Words are names."

This was even more cryptic, but if he was rabbiting on about Beyond again then this was definitely Tsukumojuku, so I relaxed. I'd missed that, too. "Is your weird ass name the name of God?"

"Yes. Tsukumojuku is 9, 10, 9, 10, 9. If you flip the kanji for 9, 九, you get the astrological symbol for Jupiter, ♃, Jupiter being the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus. The God of Gods. The kanji for ten, 十, is a cross; so my name has three all-powerful gods linked together by two crosses. If God is the Trinity, then God can be split into three. I am in the Arrow Cross House, I am here, and I am trying to connect to a third me. You have go to where he is. Take my hand."

I laughed at the note of authority he placed on that command, felt a wave of exhilaration wash over me the like I'd not felt since our adventures together, and took his hand.

"The nature of my name suggests that we'll meet again, one more time," Tsukumojuku said, and everything faded to black.

In the darkness, the hand I was holding no longer belonged to Tsukumojuku. A small palm, and thin fingers. A girl's hand. She seemed to be as surprised as me, and in darkness so thick I couldn't see my own nose I heard her ask, "Eh? Who?" and shock and fear

struck us both upside the head, like our brains had been replaced with gas.

"It's me, Lisa Lisa," I said. That was all she needed.

"Jorge!? Why are you here!?"

I couldn't begin to explain the why or how of it, but the Lisa Lisa holding my hand in the darkness was definitely real. More so than Tsukumojuku had been. "Calm down, Lisa Lisa. Where are we?"

"Rome. In an underground temple nobody has set foot in for over a thousand years. How can you possibly be here? I can't believe it..."

"I couldn't begin to explain. More importantly, what's going on? An underground temple?" The air was damp and cold, and smelt of mold and dust. It felt like the ground under my feet was paved with stones, and despite the total lack of light, it decidedly felt like a place that actually existed. "And why is it so dark here?"

"My light was stolen. I had a lamp a moment ago..."

"Stolen? Is there someone else here?"

"I came with my dad and everyone...but we got separated ages ago. There's a...I can't call it an enemy, but there's *something* protecting something."

"Something protecting what?"

"The Aja Red Stone."

"What's that?"

"I dunno. Nobody alive has ever seen it. It's a jewel of some kind; a Roman Emperor hid it, supposedly."

"Eh? Are you actually here to plunder it, Lisa Lisa!? Are you treasure hunting!?"

"No, dummy. The Hamon Warriors are...until I joined Straits properly, I assumed we were hunting vampires and zombies, but that's not true at all. We're actually protecting mankind, and the secrets of mankind."

"Oh? Thanks!"

Lisa Lisa did a spit take, and started giggling. I couldn't see

her face in the darkness, but that just made me extra sensitive to her voice, and I had to admit she had a really cute voice. "Heh heh heh, World's fastest gratitude, Jorge. Don't be so quick to swallow a line about mankind's secrets."

"I've seen enough to know what you're fighting is real."

"...right. You enjoying high school? I heard you've moved to England, and you're going to school there."

Mm? Was it fun? Not school...Steven and Kenton were good people, but I'd just had that fight with Darlington...no, no. "This is hardly the time to talk about that, is it, Lisa Lisa?"

"But Jorge...I keep imaging how much fun you're having in school, and that's what keeps me going. You get to have friends, and live a normal life, and I picture you laughing with everyone, and that gives me strength."

Gulp. If she put it that way I *had* to say I was having fun, I thought.

"You aren't being bullied again, are you?" Lisa Lisa said, a hint of the fierceness she'd had when we were kids in her voice.

"No, I have friends," I said, panicking. "They're amazing. We're studying how to make airplanes. You know about airplanes, Lisa Lisa? They let humans fly! The ones we're making are all wood and cloth, but there are people out there making them out of metal with heavy engines on board. They can make metal fly! Can you imagine it? Heh heh heh. And I've figured out how it works! The speed provides vertical lift!"

Mm? Was that simplification completely true? I stopped to think, and Lisa Lisa said, "Oh...airplanes. You've finally discovered airplanes, Jorge..."

"? Yes. Why? You jealous? Heh heh. The English are always on the cutting edge."

"....."

Talking about how much fun I was having made Lisa Lisa get weirdly quiet, and I didn't know what to do. I thought she'd just said she wanted me to be happy? As my mind raced, I heard a

sound behind me, like something moving, scraping against the ground. It was...maybe three, five meters? But...it was still pitch black so I couldn't tell you how I knew, but somehow I was sure this thing was humongous.

"Pfffffffffffffff....."

I could hear it breathing. It let out a long, wet sigh, like a fat man who'd just reached the top of the stairs.

"My..." Lisa Lisa whispered, hoarsely. "My lamp...I think this is the thing that took it." Her voice was shaking. She was scared.

"Pfffffffffffffffffffffffffffft.....ffffbbbbbbbtttt"

It sighed again, and this time I could hear it vibrating past the thing's lips. I could sense imposing muscle mass. Like twenty gorillas fused into one and glaring at us. Had she been facing this thing alone?

She needs you.

Lisa Lisa had called me, and Tsukumojuku had let me come. Hate to treat you like a handy tool, but I am grateful, Tsukumojuku.

I let out a slow, long sigh. This giant monster was hiding in the darkness, sighing to let us know it was there, to put pressure on us, but not me. I was letting it know I was calm. I felt there was no point in resisting it. It had come after Lisa Lisa, but it hadn't hurt her; just stolen her lamp. Why would a monster steal a lamp?

To scare Lisa Lisa. The same as this phony sigh. It was just trying to scare both of us. ...at the least, it hadn't yet touched either of us. It wasn't the right timing yet. We weren't completely scared. We could still be more afraid. The monster was toying with us, but had not made a move to get rid of us completely. The monster hadn't shown itself at all while Lisa Lisa and I were talking normally. Yeah. If we acted normal, it wouldn't show up. So why had it come out now? What had brought it out?

Oh, because Lisa Lisa went quiet. Why?

Because I'd mentioned airplanes. I didn't know why me talking about airplanes made Lisa Lisa depressed, but that had

clearly been the mood changer. ...hmm. So...was I right in thinking the monster had been hiding somewhere, noticed the change in mood, and was like, 'oh yeah, my turn!' and popped out?

No monster that ridiculous could actually exist. Monsters generally showed up to ruin peace and good times. They didn't usually give a shit what the mood was. In other words...the monster with us here certainly existed, but Lisa Lisa had actually summoned it. Lisa Lisa's feelings brought it here.

Right, when the monster showed up, Lisa Lisa had gone quiet, but I was still normal and happy, super excited about the potential future of aeronautics. My emotions didn't matter. This monster came from Lisa Lisa's feelings.

This conclusion still let me wondering what it all meant (I had no idea) but whatever. I wasn't wrong. As long as I wasn't wrong, that was all I needed. "It's all right, Lisa Lisa," I said. I didn't tell her the monster wasn't attacking for fear that would just make her focus on the monster even more. What now?

"...what's all right?"

"You and me. Even if we're apart, we'll be OK."

"Eh?what do you mean? You mean you're OK without me?" Lisa Lisa said. I could feel the monster coming closer; it felt like a lot of gorillas combined to form a giant spider.

Woah, woah, woah. This definitely came from Lisa Lisa's emotions. "No," I said. "Even when we're far apart, mysterious powers can bring us together again. Like today."

Lisa Lisa seemed relieved, and the gorilla thing moved away. "Oh...but how did you get here? You were in England, right? Even if you came to Rome there's no way you could ever get inside the secret temple. Are you really Jorge? The real Jorge? I'm not just imagining you?"

I was pretty sure it was the gorilla spider in the darkness that she was imagining.

"I'm real. Hard to prove in the dark, but..." As I spoke, she moved her face closer to mine, and even though it was dark, Lisa

Lisa kissed me right on the lips. Bzzzzzt! The kiss was electrified. Not like, because it surprised me – no, something hot and cold and numbing ran from my lips to the back of my brain and down my spine until my toes were zzzzzzzzzzt! Our first kiss, at least my first kiss and probably Lisa Lisa's first kiss, so she didn't realize she'd accidentally let Hamon ripple through me. I recognized it. It felt just like the time she'd hit me with her Indigo Blue Overdrive in the hall of our school when I was eleven. In the darkness my eyes rolling back in my head, her soft lips on mine, I forced myself to withstand the electric shock. After a moment Lisa Lisa noticed, and squeaked, "Eh? Ah! Sorry, Jorge!"

I was glad she'd noticed. It was best if she forgot that the gorilla spider had gone away.

My legs were still not quite under my control, but I said, "Let's walk a bit," and Lisa Lisa helped me take a few steps farther. There was no point in just standing there, and if Lisa Lisa's emotions shifted again and something else came out I was scared I'd wind up electrocuted again.

"Hee hee hee. Sorry, Jorge! It's just...hilarious. Hee hee hee hee hee.pft ha ha ha I can't stop laughing about it."

"Please can I have another."

"Whaa...? Hee hee hee hee hee no, Jorge you're too funny!"

".....?"

"But laughing has calmed me down. I'm breathing properly again. Good. I can feel out the terrain with my Hamon as we walk."

"Eh? You're running Hamon through the ground?"

"Yes, but it's not attack Hamon, I'm just sensing where the walls and stuff are."

"OK, just warn me when you do it."

"Eh? OK, then, here we go. ...now."

I jumped as high as my quivering legs would let me.

"Pbbbt.....! ♡♡♡ Oh god, stop! Don't make me laugh any

more!"

"Eh? But, it's scary!"

"It is not, I promise!" Lisa Lisa's face came closer to mine again, and kissed me again (I went stiff) but there was no shock this time. Just Lisa Lisa's gentle, soft kiss. "See?"

Oh, yes. Right. I didn't say that aloud so I said it again, "Ah, w-w-wight."

"Heh heh heh. I know where to go," she took my arm, and pulled me farther in. Like she could see everything around us. I staggered along after her. Every time she used Hamon to feel the road, I jumped in the air, and she broke up laughing, but I wasn't joking!

"I never imagined searching this temple for the Aja Red Stone would be so filled with wacky hijinks!" Lisa Lisa said, doubled over with laughter. "Oh, I found a torch." She picked something up out of the darkness, struck it against the stones, and the sparks lit the fire.

With a foom, the torch lit the room. At some point – I guess Lisa Lisa had been able to see it, but it was a surprise to me – we had entered a giant treasure chamber, filled with massive vases and chests and jewels and precious metals and statues made of metal and armor and weapons scattered everywhere in great heaps. The room was so big the light of the torch did not reach the ceiling or the far walls, and every inch of it was packed with the secrets of ancient Rome. Thick pillars stretched up from the floor, forming a circle around where we were; the room itself was circular, and we found ourselves surrounded not just by pillars but by three meter tall stone guardians placed here and there in the piles of treasure. The guardians were all hideous, glaring at us with terrifying scowls. Where we stood was the center of the sea of treasure.

"There," Lisa Lisa said, picking up a large red jewel the size of her palm. I could instantly see the gem was pure, without any flaws at all. It seemed as if the stone itself glowed, reflecting more light than the torch provided.

"I found it...! Hey, Jorge, will you put this on me?" Lisa Lisa handed me the red stone. It was far lighter than I'd expected, so much so I almost didn't believe it existed. There was so little weight to it it was almost like I was seeing things, so I poked it with the tip of my finger. It was hard. Yet, there was something soft about it, like the skin on the tip of my finger was being absorbed into it. "Come on," Lisa Lisa said. I turned towards her. She had her back to me, and had gathered up her long brunette hair, revealing the white at the nape of her neck. The jewel was fitted to a pendant, so I passed that around the other side of her thin neck, and closed the clasp on the chain behind her head. Standing behind her like this I could see her neck and shoulders and the swell of her chest and had to fight off a sudden urge to throw my arms around her. What was I thinking? This was Lisa Lisa – part of me was still thinking like that, but we'd already kissed.

Wait, why had we kissed?

I hadn't. She'd kissed me.

Eh? Did Lisa Lisa like me? It seemed so...why?

Did I have feelings for Lisa Lisa?

But once I started asking myself questions like that I knew only too well I'd just start going in circles, so I decided to put it off for later.

"Jorge," Lisa Lisa said, "About this red stone..." Her voice had none of the giddiness threatening to overrun my mind.

"Uh, yeah?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone I have it."

"? Okay, but why?"

"Not because I want to keep it all to myself, understand? I have to protect this stone with my life. If you let anybody else know that I have it, I'll have to hide it somewhere and then die."

"Eh.....!?"

"And if that happens I'll kill you too, Jorge, so that we can be together in the next world."

"....." She was smiling, but I knew she wasn't joking.

Gulp.

"So I'm going to tell everybody that this is a present from you, Jorge. As proof of our vows."

"Eh!?"

"Pfft! ♡♡♡♡ Ha ha ha! But I really will say that!"

"Eh? Eh? Ehhhh!"

"Heh heh heh. How does it look? As necklaces go...isn't it a bit too gaudy?"

".....!?" Smiling in the light of the torch Lisa Lisa had long eye lashes, strong features, big eyes, high cheeks, a turned up nose, a strong chin and beautiful hair. She was every bit a match for the size of the stone...but I could not put that into words.

Lisa Lisa hid the pendant inside her clothes, and we left the treasure room. A few minutes walk by torchlight and we were at the entrance, and Straits was waiting for her. Everyone was super surprised to see me. "...Jorge Joestar? Why are you...?"

"Sorry to drop in," I said, and Lisa Lisa cracked up again, and all the Hamon warriors looked astonished to see her smile.

Lisa Lisa described the vault, and said there had been such a vast quantity of jewels there that she'd been unable to find the Red Stone. She bowed her head, and Straits said, "It's amazing you were even able to reach the treasure room. Nobody has ever been able to get there before. Weren't you...scared?"

"Yes," Lisa Lisa said. "If Jorge hadn't been with me, I don't think I'd ever have made it through."

Straits and the others all nodded gravely, but I could hear them mumbling about how I'd come to be there. "Lisa Lisa summoned me," I said.

"Hey!" she said, slapping my arms, but...wasn't that what had happened?

After that we left the secret temple, moved stealthily to the Hamon Warriors' secret base, where I borrowed a phone and called home. Penelope answered, sounding beside herself, and when she heard I was in Italy she was shocked and even more flustered so my mother took the phone from her. "Hello, Jorge? You're in Rome?"

"Yeah, sorry. I can't really explain how I came to be here."

"That's fine, that's fine, as long as you're safe. Do you have a chair?"

"Eh? Yeah."

"Then sit down and listen."

"? OK," I moved to the chair and sat down. "I'm sitting."

"Listen closely. Did you go to the Motorize manor today?"

"Yes. I promised Darlington I would."

"OK. Did you see either of the older children?"

"? No? Why?"

"They found the older girl, Kenton Motorize, on the cape."

"Eh? What does that mean?"

"She's dead, Jorge."

"Ehhhhhhhhhh!?" I shot up out of my seat, and all the Hamon warriors turned to look at me. Including Lisa Lisa. "What...but how? Was she alone? They're always worried about accidents, so Steven is always with her..."

"Kenton Motorize told her brother you'd invited her there, and went out alone. Your airplane was at the scene. The one you'd been working on in the garden."

I could tell Mum was fighting back tears, but I was just confused. "Eh? So...Kenton took my plane out, got on it, and crashed?" That made no sense. Kenton knew full well I wasn't done repairing it. Why would she do that?

Mum interrupted my thoughts. "It wasn't an accident, Jorge. The airplane didn't crash. Kenton Motorize was stabbed over and over on top of the cliff. Stabbed with a knife that bore our...the Joestar crest. And your airplane was there with her. Oh, Jorge. Can you explain what happened to the police and Steven Motorize?"

I could not.

Chapter 8
Nero Nero Island
ネーロネーロ島

The murders of Kira Yoshikage and Tsukumojuku, the three displays made from the bodies of murdered detectives (including Tsukumojuku's), Morioh setting sail, the group suicide of village residents, the mysterious figure hiding inside Cube House...and now on top of all that another mysterious moving island sailing across the sea, just like Morioh...there were just too many things I had to think about, I thought. It had been one thing after another, and I'd had no time to really work any of them over in my mind. Oh well. I had to assume this was the speed events always unfolded at in Morioh; I had to keep up.

"Fuck! I've got no damn idea what's going on. Let's go take a look," Nijimura Fukashigi said, and started to get on a dolphin.

"Hang on, Fukashigi," I said. "There might be people like you on that island, too. Better not to show our hands."

Morioh seemed to have quite a lot of Stand Masters. If that unusual quality had something to do with it floating away, then that could be true over there, too. If there were two island moving across the water, there might be similarly unique.

How many other Stand Masters were there in Morioh, anyway? How many Stand Masters had been among the hundreds who died in Jozenji?

Fukashigi grit his teeth, and got off the dolphin. The other island was getting steadily closer.

"Maybe these'll help us recon," Muryotaisu said, emerging from Arrow Cross with a telescope and a pair of binoculars, presumably Rohan's.

"Oh!" I said, impressed. I was kicking myself inside, though. "Muryotaisu, better not go inside Arrow Cross for a bit. Earlier, I found Cube House hidden inside it, and there was someone inside Cube House. Someone suspicious."

"What...?" Muryotaisu looked at the new island, and back at Cube House, as if not sure which he should tackle first.

"I've locked Cube House up, and made sure we'll know if anyone goes in or out," I said.

"I dunno, man...how do you get in?"

"Oh, directly above and below the desk in the study."

"Got it," he said, and went back inside. He came out a few minutes later, and explained, "I set up a hidden video camera." I was sure the camera was Rohan's, too, and the idea of him just doing whatever he wanted with Rohan's things made me want to laugh, but there was too much going on for that.

"Woah, that ain't Japan! It's some foreign island!" Fukashigi yelled. I took the binoculars off him and took a look. He was right; the view was nothing you'd seen in Japan. There were only a few buildings in sight, but they were mostly made of brick, and there were several windmills. Not sights you saw a lot in Japanese country towns. The crops waving in the wind looked like wheat. I looked down at the water's edge. There were several ships with Italian names. I found a sign by the road leading from the docks to the town. It said, "Welcome to Nero Nero Island!" in Italian.

"Nero Nero Island, it says." Muryotaisu went back inside Arrow Cross, and came back out with an encyclopedia. Nero Nero Island was about a tenth the size of Morioh, population roughly three thousand.

I knew a bit more that wasn't written in the encyclopedia "Nero is Italian for 'black'. Nero Nero island has a long history as a Mafia base." I had to do a lot of research about organized crime around the world for a previous case. "These days Nero Nero Island is the headquarters of the Passione Family. They've got about three hundred members. Territory reaching to Rome and Napoli – Naples, in English. They're competing with the Sicilian Mafia and the Camorra, so how a group this small survives...well, I didn't know how before, but since Nero Nero is on the move, I'd bet there's a good chance they've got a lot of Stand Masters in

their ranks. They're already fairly unique in that there aren't any records of the boss's face, and he's so secretive that not even the inner circle has ever met the boss. The only name anyone even has for him is 'Diavolo.' Italian for 'Devil.' Hey! What's that?"

Just like Morioh, the Nero Nero Island harbor and part of the ocean around were inside a giant bubble. I'd just found a truck racing down the road to the harbor.

"Looks like they're in trouble," Muryotaisu said, looking through the telescope. "I can see people in back, waving at us. What?"

I looked, but the magnification on the binoculars wasn't strong enough. I squinted trying to see, and the little truck suddenly went up in flame and rolled.

"Ahh!" we yelled. Figures emerged on either side of the burning truck, approached the people lying on the ground, and light flashed at their hands. Pop. Pop pop. Pop.

"Shit shit shit! Fuck! They're killing everyone on the truck! Jesus! They ambushed that truck! God damn it, I gotta go help!"

Muryotaisu tossed the telescope aside, and flew off into the sky with his three dolphins. All I could do was watch. There was a barrier around Morioh, and nothing inside or out could get through it. They'd rammed a jet fighter into it, and shot missiles at it, and couldn't break through the wall, but if Muryotaisu somehow got through that would definitely change things. "Shit! There's still one left alive!" I could see someone running through the grass towards us. He must have slipped away while the gunmen were attacking the truck. He was waving desperately in the direction of Morioh, begging us to help. Light flashed behind him. Pop pop pop. Pop pop pop. Like he was knocked aside by an invisible hand, the man running towards us went sprawling on the ground.

"Can't you do anything, dipshit!?" Fukashigi yelled.

NYPD Blue had picked up the telescope, and was looking

through it. He bellowed back, "What the fuck do you want me to do? Shoot back!?" He pulled a gun out of his side holster; it was huge, and very real. He put it away immediately. "This bad boy is a Colt Python. It's loaded with .357 magnums. It's from the first production run they ever did; it's damn close to being a work of art. This fucker hits you it'll blow the back of your head clean off. If it hits you. Even the best gun has an effective range, kid. Bullets don't fly forever. They slow down, their arc changes, then they turn into a bit of lead and land somewhere. That's how bullets work. Even if I had a fucking sniper rifle I couldn't hit them at this range. Even if I could, there's a barrier between us. Probably two."

"Argh! So you can't fucking do anything!?"

"I am doing something! I'm gathering evidence. I'll arrest all these motherfuckers."

"Arrest...? Fuck that, we have to help those people!"

"No can do, asshole. Oh, looks like one of the murder squad is Passione's Dolcio Cioccolata." Four pieces of paper shot out of NYPD Blue's side, fwp fwp fwp fwp from the gap of his shirt. I picked them up; they were copies of the files Interpol, the Italian police, the CIA, and the FBI had on him. Not only had he sold drugs in America, he'd even been involved in terrorist activity. "I'm broadcasting video footage live to all four organizations. Heh heh...oh, Secco Rotario's there, too. Passione members running around their base, killing ordinary citizens...either they're trying to kill the boss, and cutting off his escape, or they already did it, and are cleaning up."

Three men who looked like farmers made it to the harbor, jumped in a boat, and headed towards us. Muryotaisu was in Morioh Harbor, trying to reach them, but was stuck helplessly behind the barrier. He'd begun throwing his shoulder against it, trying to break through, but the invisible wall refused to budge. Over on Nero Nero Island, the farmer's boat crashed into another

invisible wall. The prow rammed headlong into it, the boat tilted sideways, and the farmers were flung out of their seats. One landed on the boat, but the other two went in the water. There was a good two hundred meters between the two barriers. Muryotaisu and his dolphins kept up their assault, but could not break through the wall. Two hundred meters away, boats came after the escape boat. Light flashed. Pop. Pop. Pop pop pop. Pop. Pop.

"Augghhhh! Shit! Shit! Shit!" Fukashigi yelled. I couldn't watch, and turned my eyes away, and saw more paper lying on the ground. I picked it up and read it. One sheet was Secco Rotario's hospital records. It didn't name any kind of psychological or physical condition; the only thing written on it was the name of his doctor. Dolcio Cioccolata. Wait, he was a doctor?

I looked back up and the slaughter had ended. The three in the boat weren't the only ones who reached the water; there were other bodies lying on the docks. The Mafia members moved them out of sight, dropping the bodies in the water between the boats, or tossing them into the tall grass by the side of the road to the harbor. Most likely, they only bothered so it would be easier to kill anyone else who came running, if there was anyone left alive.

"Hey...they can see our island, right?" Fukashigi said, his lips quivering. "How can they just kill people in plain sight?"

I didn't answer. But there was only one answer. Because it wouldn't cause any problems. Or because they knew they could stop it from being a problem.

The Mafia got rid of problems in three main ways. Bribes, threats, and murdering witnesses. There was no way they'd try and buy or threaten however many people there in Morioh. But would they really try and kill everyone here? No matter how many of them there were, could they really manage that? I remembered the message Hirose Kouji had received from the former American

President.

He said if nothing changes, the American army will flip the island!

That was delivered shortly after Morioh changed course. The sudden swerve West had put Funny Valentine in danger, so he had clearly noticed it; by 'nothing changes' he meant if we kept heading West, so we were still headed in the dangerous direction he'd warned us about. Was it possible the Mafia was aware of the American army's intentions?

According to the records NYPD Blue's stomach had printed out, Passione had already started operating in America, and there were no lines of business the Mafia couldn't find a way to profit on, so they must have been making political and military contacts; perhaps these had informed them.

But Nero Nero Island was running alongside Morioh. It, too, was traveling in the same dangerous direction. Perhaps Nero Nero had received the same threat from America, and they'd taken advantage of the panic to start in-fighting? Were they certain their powers would allow them to survive what was coming?

Whatever was going through the Passione members' minds, the threat to Morioh was still very real. Bariya Choumaru had suggested we would have to police ourselves, but that had mostly been an appeal to Kira Yoshikage's state of mind, so in my opinion, we would need to be prepared for further attacks from the outside. As I reached this conclusion, Muryotaisu came riding back to us on his dolphin. He looked exhausted, physically and mentally.

"Fuck those guys," he said, shaking with rage. I wasn't sure what a high school delinquent could do against the Mafia, but he was in no mood to have this pointed out. Whatever it was he could do, we all had to work together now.

"Muryotaisu, you have any idea how many Stand Masters there are in Morioh?"

He thought a minute, then shook his head. "How could I?"

"How many do you know about?"

"...I can't just tell you that."

"Come on, this isn't the time for that..." I said, and trailed off, gaping.

It was starting.

"Shit shit shit shit shit! Here it comes!" Fukashigi shrieked. Muryotaisu turned to look.

Nero Nero Island had been running off Morioh's starboard side, but it had suddenly veered port-wise, towards us, the head of the island approaching diagonally. We were headed straight West, so Nero Nero Island's head came ramming into Morioh's South side, into Morioh harbor, right before our eyes...!

"Oh shiiiiiiiiit!" I yelled, thinking furiously. The barrier had stood up to a jet fighter and a missile attack, but could it stop another barrier, another island? Morioh's barrier was larger, but when two 'ships' crashed into each other, size was less important than the angle. Morioh was unable to avoid the attack...! Zzzuun! There was dull roar, and Morioh lurched sideways as the other island slammed into it.

"Fuuuuck!" we yelped, hastily crouching down in the grass. We put our hands on the grounds to steady ourselves, but to no avail. There was a zhump as Morioh recovered that sent me and the Nijimura brothers rolling head over heels towards the harbor. When we managed to stop ourselves and look up, we saw Nero Nero Island slowly rising out of the water. It had not stopped moving forward on impact; instead, the two barriers slid against each other, forcing the smaller island upwards. Soon we could see what was propelling the island forward. Nero Nero Island had not just been floating.

It had been swimming.

As the underside of Nero Nero Island came into view, two

massive legs appeared, skittering against the side of the barrier!

"Uhh...I'm not too good with insects," Fukashigi said. There was a ear-splitting rumble, the ground shook...and then there was a thundering crack as if lightning was hitting the entire sky at once, and we all clapped our hands to our ears as Nero Nero Island came crashing through the barrier dome, and landed in Morioh harbor. The weight of the other island had broken through the barrier.

The barrier's sound proofing was gone too. The massive island hit the sea with a horrible thuuuuuuud.

A white wall of waves rose up, rocking the still waters of the harbor, doing terrible things to the boats and the coastal parts of town. While the wreckage was still being tossed around in the churn, Nero Nero Island moved forward, the two legs reaching up. Two more massive, muscular legs reached out from the sides of the island, hooked their claws onto the sides of the hole in the barrier, and began squeezing the rest of its body, the island, through the gap.

We no longer remembered to scream.

The sound of the waves in Morioh harbor echoed off the interior of the dome, the thuds slamming into our bodies. It was painful, like our ears were ripping open, like someone was driving a nail into our head. But we didn't dare close our eyes.

Nero Nero Island had twisted its massive body into the sky above Morioh harbor, and was now standing on six legs. It was neither island nor ship, but an insect. My legs were shaking, and my entire body felt numb. I couldn't move a muscle. Muryotaisu and Fukashigi were both standing perfectly still, mouths open, all color drained from their faces. Only the Stands were moving.

Grand Blue's three dolphins slid up next to Muryotaisu, and started shoving into him, chirping, "Kikiki." He snapped out of his trance just as...

BANG!

An explosion rang out over the sound of the waves. I jumped and spun around and found NYPD Blue aiming his Colt Python at Nero Nero Island, smoking curling from the barrel.

"Heh," NYPD Blue grunted. "I know perfectly well that didn't reach them. That was a wake up call, you little fucks. We got no time to stand around gawking. Wake the fuck up, you punk motherfuckers! What now? If I was in charge here, I'd say we retreat and regroup." I had no objections to that plan.

The Nijimuras and I stood up, dashed past Arrow Cross House to the other side of the hill, and were about to jump on Muryotaisu's dolphins when I remembered something.

Sugimoto Reimi!

I let go of Johana's fin, dropped back to the slope, used the momentum to swing myself into a U-turn and dashed back up the hill. "Hey, where you going?" I heard Fukashigi call after me, as his dolphin carried him away. "Reimi!" I yelled. Just as I reached the white pebbles around Arrow Cross, a voice behind me said, "Thank you, Jorge. I'll go. You run." Grateful for these words, I turned around and found Rohan flying behind me, Blue Thunder on his head. He passed me by. "Let me take care of Sugimoto!"

But I didn't leave. No detective would leave until he was sure everyone was safe! And I had also remember the figure inside Cube House. I couldn't run until I'd figured out who that was!

Scrnch scrnch scrnch gravel flew in my wake and I caught a glimpse of Nero Nero Island making land in Morioh harbor through the sunroom window. The waves had already demolished the town, and now the island's giant legs were crushing the rubble. The ground in town couldn't handle the weight of the island, and with each step the insect took, bmmff, crnkk, pbbbbbggg, its feet sank into the ground, and the hollows filled with maybe sea water? Ground water? Either way, the sea extended itself via these pocks.

I almost stopped to gawk at it again, but I forced myself not

to. I heard for the West sunroom, where Muryotaisu had carried Sugimoto. Rohan and Reimi were there. They were watching Nero Nero Island trample Morioh harbor, terrified. When I saw that Sugimoto had her arms around Rohan I hesitated, but there was no time to spare.

"Rohan! Reimi! Can you get out of here?" I called out through the window. Sugimoto jumped, but shook her head. Right, she was a Stand, I thought..

"Jorge," she said. "I think this is the safest place. I think."

"?"

"If it was the old Cube House, it definitely would be. To the Cube House, the outside world is beyond the world's end, and not something that ever affects it." I knew what she was saying, now. Yes, normally the seven cubes of a tesseract formed the inside of an eighth cube that wrapped around them. Cube House was a tesseract made of square walls, so inside it was a single universe, an entire world squeezed inside, so the Cube House itself was not part of our universe. Nothing would affect it, which meant you could attack the crap out of it and it would never reach the inside. The walls of the Cube House were the ends of that world.

Which all made me wonder why Rohan and Fukashigi had avoided exploding by being placed under Arrow Cross. I had assumed it formed a vacuum, but this was clearly not the whole story. If it had been, they would not have survived there for long. They had lived because they were not just under Arrow Cross, but under Cube House; because the world's very end lay on top of them. A zone where everything was reset to zero, the absolute buffer.

Pushing aside my excitement, I said, "Then let's escape into Cube House."

"But it's turned into Arrow Cross, so I don't know if its old power remains."

Sugumoto didn't know her own power. If a Stand was power manifested, perhaps it was the same as people not knowing their own strength.

"No, Cube House itself exists simultaneously," I said. She looked surprised, and I led her and Rohan into the study.

First I checked the rug. It was still in place. I inspected the top of the desk as well. Nothing out of place. No one had gone in or out. Then I moved the desk away from the door.

"Ah! Hey, don't touch that! To a manga artist, a desk is like a chef's kitchen or a teacher's podium! It's not something anyone else should feel free to just move around as they like!"

I ignored him. When I moved the rug aside and revealed the door, he shut up. Sugimoto looked just as surprised. "Uh, so I went below this door earlier, and there was someone there. I don't suppose you know who?" I asked.

"Eh? No..."

"OK. Then..." I debated whether I should say anything, but decided I should. "Worst case scenario, Tsukumojuku's murderer is hiding out inside here. Our working theory is that Rohan didn't notice the killer arranging the display of Tsukumojuku's body and escaping because he was asleep," I said. Rohan shook his head. "That's your theory, not mine," he insisted. I cut him off. "But it's possible Rohan didn't notice his escape because he hasn't escaped yet. Because he's below this door."

"I see," Rohan said. "So he made that locked room without my eyes and ears detecting a thing because he made this a temporary way point? He carried everything he needed, including Tsukumojuku down here ahead of time, and then began work once I left the study?"

Despite the events outside, Rohan sounded so calm it effortlessly dissipated all the tension I was trying to create. "I certainly considered that, but I don't believe he would have had

that much time to kill Tsukumojuku. After all, I met Tsukumojuku last night, at 11:30 PM, in Fukui, in the town of Nishi-Akatsuki. No matter how fast he worked I don't think he could have killed Tsukumojuku before dawn, or gone through all the steps he would have needed to plan this. But this isn't really the time to discuss it in detail. Rohan, do you have anything that would work as a weapon?"

"Maybe a golf club?"

"Can I borrow that? And a rope."

"I have some mountain climbing gear."

"I'll borrow that, too."

"Just so you know, both were forced on me by my editors. They keep saying I should exercise more. I haven't touched them since."

"I really don't care. Sorry, kinda in a hurry, here."

I stood back up and looked around for the hidden camera Muryotaisu had set up. There. It was hidden behind a plant in the corner of the room.

As I was checking the camera, Rohan came back with a golf bag and a bundle of rope. "Ah! That's my camera!" he yelled. "I had Muryotaisu set it to record in case anyone went in or out of this door," I said. I turned the desk so it straddled the door, tied the rope to the desk, and opened the door, letting it fall into the room. Rohan peered into the space below, and muttered, "Ooof.. this was under my feet this whole time?" I dropped the rest of the rope through the door.

"Jorge," Sugimoto said. "Going in there is dangerous."

"Eh?"

"Cube House is meant for a single occupant. If two or more people run around inside, it could be very bad."

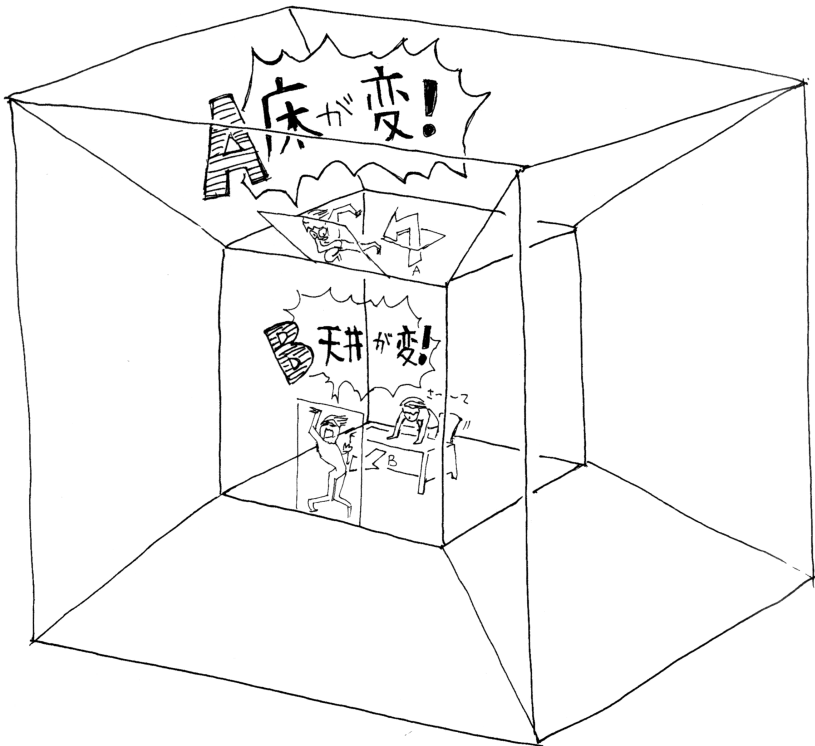
"Bad how?"

"It could lead to contradictions. With floors and ceilings."

The rooms inside turn to accommodate the people inside."

"Oh, I see...as long as you move horizontally from the study, nothing can go wrong, but..."

"Right. If you go below the floor or above the ceiling, the floor of the room next door is the wall of the room next to the study."



A: "The floor is weird!"

B: "The ceiling is weird!"

"...hmm. ...So, uh, how does the Cube House handle these contradictions?"

"One of you will be pulled into a parallel universe. He'll be lost in that world, and never get anywhere."

Jeez, that was hella scary. "...has that happened before?"

"Nope. When Cube House was Cube House I was all alone in here. But I know. That's how it works, with powers. You know things without having to test them, but there's still lots you don't know. You know?"

...I wonder if the intruder I encountered had grocked to the danger of parallel worlds, and run from me?

I wasn't sure.

"Um, but then, if we go down now, isn't it still dangerous?" Rohan asked, anxiously.

Sugimoto smiled. "Don't worry, Rohan. I'm the owner of Cube House. I'm the basis of its behavior. I decide where the floors and ceiling and walls go."

Good! But we had to hurry. "Then let's go in!" I said. I took a firm grip on the rope.

"Wait," Sugimoto said. "Make sure you don't fall straight down."

"Eh? Oh."

"I'm the the door down there would catch your fall, but if you broke through the door, and did that three times...it would be very bad."

I looked up. The third door she mentioned was the door in the ceiling. The room below the room below the room below this one was the study, so if I broke through all three, I'd fall forever. What would happen then? If gravity increased my fall speed here, I'd fall until I hit terminal velocity.

"Everything's so extreme and permanent," I muttered.

"It's the Cube House," Sugimoto said. "Can't be helped."

True. This was a world of its own.

All three of us made it safely down the rope to the room below. It was immediately obvious Sugimoto felt more at home down here in Cube House. She smiled more. "Let's go find this rude interloper," she said.

"Should we really leave the door up there open?" Rohan muttered, looking up at it. "If that giant insect monster steps on it, what'll happen? I guess we're on a pretty big hill. It probably won't try climbing up here."

"Don't worry, Rohan," she said. "There's no way it could do anything to Cube House."

That square house – the neighbors called it Cube House – supposedly was moved here from a town called Nishi Akatsuki, in Fukui. How that rumor got around without anyone having any idea who owned the house, nobody knows.

I remembered Rohan saying that.

If nobody could do anything to it, how could anyone have moved it?

"I don't know," Sugimoto shrugged.

I sighed, and raised the golf club, ready for anything.

"Hey! Don't act like I'm supposed to know that. That's the very core of my being! Most humans couldn't tell you anything like that. Ask someone how they became what they are, go on."

She had a point, I admitted, as I lowered myself into the room below. Sugimoto and Rohan stayed in the room below the study, and I went down a room below that, opened the door in the floor, and made sure the room below that was empty. I was in the room below the room below the study, which was also the room above the room above the study. Three center doors were open, and if I fell through here and broke through the ceiling of the study,

Sugimoto had said I'd fall forever without ever escaping Cube House.

"Anyone there?" "Nope." "Then come back up." Easier said than done.

But with a little effort I managed to scramble back up the room to where Rohan and Sugimoto were waiting, in the room beneath the study. "Then we just have to check the four rooms around this one. Let's do that quick."

I glanced over, and Sugimoto was watching the display on the video camera I'd brought with us. "See anything?" "Nah..."

"I can't hear the giant's footsteps any more," Rohan said.

Sugimoto laughed without taking her eyes off the display. "Not in this house, no. Even the study is a room in Cube House now. No longer part of Arrow Cross."

"I sure bought one hell of a house..."

I opened the door to the east. Nobody inside.

"OK, then I'm going around to the right," I said.

Rohan nodded, and tightened his grip on his golf club. "OK, but Jorge, when you open it, don't do it slowly. Just slam the thing open like the cops do in movies. They way you're opening doors is more like a horror movie, and it's making me nervous."

"Sure thing."

I went in a circle around Sugimoto and the camera, opening doors.

Slam! Nobody in the north room.

Slam! Nobody in the west room.

"Last one." "At this speed, no way he could get out in time."

"Right."

I'd saved the south door for last, for good reason. This was the door I'd sensed the intruder's presence behind, and if he was still down here, he'd be behind this door. My palms were sweating, but I couldn't put it off any longer. I put my hand on the doorknob,

and glanced at Rohan. He nodded, but before I could open the door, Sugimoto shrieked, and staggered backwards three steps, staring at the camera in her hand.

"What is it?" Rohan said, moving over to her. But I still had to check behind this door. Slam! Empty! Good!

"Wh-wh-what does this mean, Rohan?" Sugimoto said, her voice trembling. I ran over, looked at the screen, and my jaw dropped as far as Rohan's had.

On the screen...was Tsukumojuku.

He'd climbed up the rope to the study, closed the door, put the rug back, straightened the desk he'd knocked over, put everything on the desk exactly back where it had been so that nobody could possibly tell that anyone had come through the door, and then Tsukumojuku – who was very clearly alive – looked right at the camera, and walked towards it. We could hear his footsteps on the carpet, and a thundering crash from outside.

It was the sound of Nero Nero Island crashing through the Morioh barrier. On screen, Tsukumojuku looked up, alarmed. That proved this video had been made a few minutes ago.

Tsukumojuku looked back at the camera, staring right into the lens, and grinned. "Ha ha ha, I guess my life belongs entirely to Jorge Joestar. To both Jorges: Don't worry about it. In the words of Iason Sobra Quarto: 'Life is an explosion.' My life is exploding as we speak. Ha ha! See you again." And with that, he vanished.

We stared at it dumbly for a minute, unable to think, but I couldn't afford to not think all day, so I went outside instead. "Uh... take care," Rohan said, his mind elsewhere.

Confused, Sugimoto looked up at me as I was clambering through the door. "Do humans come back to life sometimes?" she asked.

"Ha ha ha," I laughed, buoyed by the sudden possibility that Tsukumojuku might be alive. I wanted to talk to that strange boy one more time. "I think some people just don't die that easily."

Why was it I couldn't just trust that he'd come back to life?

I pulled myself up into the study, left Cube House, closed the door behind me, left Arrow House through the west sunroom, and ran down the hill.

Nero Nero Island had clambered out of the harbor, and was headed into the center of Morioh. The sheer weight of it definitely made it move slower on land. It took ages for it to simply lift one of those giant insect feet. And each step sank deep into the ground, so to pull one foot out, the other five had to dig in, which made them sink deeper, and threw the entire island's balance off. Somehow it managed not to fall over, and precariously move its foot forward, smashing buildings as that foot sank into the ground again. As rickety as the island's movement was, I still couldn't even begin to catch up with it.

My legs were too short!

I mean, they were normal lengths and I was probably on the good side of athletic but after experiencing the joy of riding Johana around my two legs felt like slugs! Blue Thunder couldn't be reloaded, apparently; it had vanished the second Rohan took it off. And there were obviously no taxis running...my feelings were getting ahead of me and I could almost cry but as I got further down the hill and reached a larger road and saw the stream of emergency vehicles headed for the destruction, the drivers' grips on their wheels, and people hanging off the fire trucks by their fingernails, to a man looking like their worlds were ending I stopped caring about my speed at all. How many people could be kept safe under Arrow Cross? Things were so bad now it might

have been better if the people in the harbor had gone crazy too.

I dashed down a dirt road through a field, looking up at the sky. It was almost five, and the sun hung low in the west. With the barrier broken, the wind was blowing again. The humid, sticky sea breeze was making me sweat, but it was still an improvement. My feet felt lighter. A lot of baggage was slipping away. The sound of Nero Nero Island's footsteps was getting closer.

I turned my gaze forward, and sped up.

I was almost at the battlefield.

I ran through Morioh suburbs. Nero Nero Island's feet had crushed an awful lot of houses, but they'd been evacuated in time, and I didn't see any signs of loss of life. I passed the rear legs, and as I drew closer to the middle legs I glanced at the deserted station, and crossed the tracks. I could make out people scurrying around the front legs. Budogaoka Academy appeared to be the center of activity, probably because lots of people had already been gathered there.

I slowed down, considering my approach, when the surface of the road next to me went pssht and I jumped.

A gunshot? I dove off the road into a garden and hid behind a wall. I looked around, but didn't see anyone. Then three more bullets went psst psst krasht moving from the road to the wall; I could feel the impacts on this side. Thunk thunk. At last I realized these weren't coming from my level.

Above me.

I looked up and saw the coast of Nero Nero island above me. Someone was absently shooting at me. Nero Nero Island's belly was a good 200 meters thick, so it was around 300 meters from here to the island's surface. I couldn't make out the face of the guy shooting at me, but I thought I could hear him laughing.

Skrnch skrnch spshhht the bullets kept coming, all hitting the other side of the wall but if I stayed here he was bound to get lucky eventually.

3, 2, 1! I summoned my nerve and broke away from the wall. I threw myself onto the porch of the house. Spsh spsh! Thunk thunk thunk thunk! Bang! Bang! Ba-bang! The hail of bullets followed after me, slamming into the roof but once I was out of sight he gave up. I laid low until I was sure the gunfire had stopped.

I let myself breathe again, then figured I should at least check on the owners of the house, since they'd saved my life. I peered in through the window, but all was quiet, no signs of anyone there. I knocked on the window and called out, but there was no answer...except for a high pitched whine coming this way, followed by a massive explosion. A house a few plots away had exploded into a pillar of fire.

A rocket launcher!?

Was I in a fucking war zone? Wait, if they'd been aiming the gun at me, they must have been aiming that rocket at someone else. I jumped up and ran off the porch.

Someone saw me go and hastily started shooting. Behind me and to either side I heard psht psht pop! Chnk! Pshhtpsht psht! Pounding into the pavement. But at this distance firing blind would never hit me if I kept moving. The rocker launcher probably couldn't get me either. I hoped whoever they were aiming that at was safe!

There was a ton of smoke, and plenty of fire left. As I drew near the impact site, I called out, "Hey! You alive!?"

"Jorge!" someone answered. "Over here!"

Hirose Kouji was hiding in the garage, on the other side of the rubble. "Oh! Good! You're not hurt?"

"Nope! You?"

"I'm fine!"

I ran into the garage too.

"They might fire a second missile down, so we should keep moving," Hirose said. "They've got a shit load of weapons."

"Right."

"Here. Just think and it'll fly you there," Hirose said, and put a Blue Thunder on my head, too. We flew right out of the garage. Vvroom! This was...even better than the dolphins! I could really steer it at will, with no hands. Every thought I had turned to action, as if I was really flying on my own! But since the propeller was on my head I couldn't shake the feeling that my neck hurt. (It didn't.)

I followed after Hirose as we flew serpentine through the neighborhood, flying just above the ground so as to better hide ourselves from the shooters on Nero Nero Island. We dodged propane tanks and bicycles, vvwip vvwip vvvrrr vvvrrr until we flew into a factory and found the Nijimura brothers.

"Ohhh, you're alive, Jorge?" Fukashigi said. "What about Rohan and Reimi?" Muryotaisu asked. I let them know the two of them were safe inside Cube House inside Arrow Cross. I didn't mention Tsukumojuku just yet. "What's going on here?" I asked. None of them said anything immediately.

Sensing the Nijimura brothers didn't want to admit they were in trouble. Hirose finally broke the silence. "Shock and awe. We're occupied and they're in control. While everyone was still in a panic because the island was stomping Morioh flat several Stand Masters with weapons came floating down, and kidnapped all the exhausted, half-dead folks in the gym. One of them has a Stand like a tornado, and it vacuumed them all up."

"That was Dolcio Cioccolata," NYPD Blue said. "I got the evidence."

"Fuck, man...don't just record shit, do something about it!" Fukashigi yelled. His voice was hoarse, and the yell was more

anguished than angry.

"Look," NYPD Blue said. "You order me to go into the mafia HQ alone, I ain't the type to back down. Like I said, up to you."

".....!"

"Tch, you're just a punk kid. You talk big, but talk is cheap. You gotta grow up. Match your build. Pathetic."

"Raggh, damn it! Then what the fuck should I do?"

"I told you that, too. Sit tight and wait. Diving empty handed into a war you can't win ain't what a man does. It's what a fool who can't stand embarrassment does. For a man to sacrifice himself he needs a better reason than shame. You gotta grin and bear it, keep your mind flexible, and wait for your moment."

".....!"

Fukashigi grit his teeth and went silent.

"Once they had hostages, all resistance ceased," Hirose said, resuming his explanation. "They called for Mayor Shishimaru, and made him their puppet. All orders from the mafia have been relayed through him. Right now they're dragging Stand Masters into the open. Promising not to harm anyone who comes forward of their own accord. But if they have to find us, we'll be punished. In a very mafia-esque move, they're encouraging people to turn in anyone they know. They've got a number of people in the last hour alone. Our names may well come to light soon."

"So?" I asked. "Is that it? Nothing else has happened yet?"

"Eh? Uh, yeah..."

"If they've got hostages and the mayor working for them and are hunting Stand Masters they're still trying to get control. They're pretty far from getting us under their thumb completely. It just feels like they have. But really, they're still trying to get us in line. And they haven't let us know their real goal yet."

"Their real goal?"

"You think they really want to occupy Morioh? They're the

mafia. There's no enemy mafia group here; they've got no vested interests in the town at all. I won't go so far as to say there's nothing here the mafia might be interested in; there's money and women, but everything that goes on in this town right now is being watched very closely. It's 2012. There are satellites chasing us around, manned and unmanned probes in the sky, monitoring the town in real time. Any yen the mafia steal right now can't be spent. They can't launder it or hide it. They can't sell any women. They know that. And they know it's only a matter of time before someone with real power hits these two islands, and occupies us for real. The barrier's already down; they did that themselves. It won't be much longer. Whatever it is they're really trying to do will come out soon; something they can accomplish with all this going on. Something tiny, that the satellites and aircraft won't ever notice, but something very important to them."

"Very important how? What can Morioh people do for the mafia?" Hirose asked.

"Our current theory is that Kira Yoshikage is moving this island, probably to escape from all the detectives descending on the town. It's a good theory; it's probably the truth. So something like that might be happening on their end. Would these psychos run from a detective? Probably not. It's a mafia island, and we saw them killing each other on Nero Nero Island from Arrow Cross hill. Whatever these psychos are up to has something to do with trouble in the mob. Like NYPD Blue said, if the mafia are killing bystanders..."

"Either they're trying to kill the boss, and cutting off his escape, or they already did it, and are cleaning up," NYPD Blue said, repeating his own line. "I did say that. Mafia headquarters are where the boss feels most safe. A place where even the non-criminals will protect him. For many, it's where they were born. They've dropped as much dough as they can there, greased the

wheels, and can expect a good return. But now it's in chaos. Either they've killed the boss and are purging the last of anyone who'd come back on them, or they're trying to kill the boss and making sure he can't get any help from the locals. Driving him into a corner. Either way, the boss dies, lots of people go with him."

I was the first to break the silence. "I dunno if NYPD Blue's theory is right or not. But it's clear the mafia are attacking for a reason. Which begs the question – why do the mafia think whatever they're after will be here? Because they've done their homework on the place. Why would the Italian Mafia have even heard of Morioh? Because Morioh started swimming out to sea. That was all over the news, and something this weird's gonna be broadcast in every country in the world. The mafia would have seen it. They'd know a killer named Kira Yoshikage lived here, and know that several detectives were murdered here."

When they saw Bariya Choumaru's press conference, I had speculated that there were other detectives here besides me. I had based that speculation on solid grounds, but would the mafia even need that? And I considered this, I heard the same truck that had delivered the call to the town meeting broadcasting a new message through its loudspeaker.

"Would the detectives Daibakusho Curry, Runbaba 12, and Jorge Joestar please hurry to the Budogaoka Academy Garden?"

Hunh!? I thought. On several layers at once. They were summoning me by name? Daibakusho Curry and Runbaba 12 were both from Nishi Akatsuki, too! All three of us were Nishi Akatsuki detectives!? Why would all the detectives in Morioh be from the same place? Even though no other detectives had been able to get here? And the timing of this summons was too perfect.

...well, timing always worked like that. Good or bad, things were always perfectly timed.

"Yikes," Fukashigi said. "What'll you do? Don't go. Wait for

your moment."

That was NYPD Blue's advice from a moment ago, so I laughed, and called him a dipshit.

"Shut the fuck up, moron," NYPD Blue roared, so suddenly both Fukashigi and me snapped our mouths shut. See? Timing.

I tried a different approach. "Detectives don't back down at a time like this," I said.

For them to know my name... I'd only told it to the three boys here, and the two in the Cube House. That means someone had done some digging and found my name.

Kira Yoshikage.

Had he sold me to the mob? Was he waiting for his chance to strike? Interesting.

I asked the Nishimuras and Hirose to provide whatever backup they could, went alone to Budogaoka Academy's garden, and found the town residents gathered there and a young Italian man in a well-tailored suit sitting on a chair in the center with Shishimaru Denta standing next to him. When Runbaba 12 and Daibakusho Curry saw me they smiled ruefully. They were both good looking men, but had clearly been through some shit; their shirts and pants were both soaking wet and ragged. Mine weren't much better.

"Hey there." "Sup." "You still alive?" "Eh heh heh." "Didn't think we'd have a reunion here." "Seriously." "What a pain. Let my curiosity get the better of me..." "Yeah, but if you were watching this on TV you'd be kicking yourself." "True." "For sure."

Fed up with us whispering to each other, THUD! The mafia dude kicked the table between us.

I didn't jump, but maaan.

"Oh shit." "Shit, shit." "Three of us here. He don't need

two." "Woah." "Well, we don't need you." "No, you." "Dipshit."

THUD! This time he had his hand in his suit jacket. Maaaybe it was time to knock it off. His hair might be okappa but he didn't seem to speak Japanese. We...or at least I spoke Italian, but it was a pain so I asked Shishimaru Denta, "So? What's he want with us?"

"Eh, um, I believe this er, phone...any minute now someone will call this phone. I think." His head was swollen in weird places so he must have put his own self on the line to protect the residents, so I forgave him. But there was no phone on the table he was pointing to. There was a filthy rubber ball and a right shoe and a pebble.

".....?"

But the pebble suddenly started ringing. "Plu pon pin para para pon plu pon pin para para pon!" It also vibrated. Oh.

"A Stand," I said, and the other two looked surprised. "Eh? What, Jorge, you know what this thing is? What is it?" "How is it ringing?"

If they didn't know about Stands, they were in for a rough ride. But they'd pick it up fast enough, like I had. I picked up the pebble. It had a display and accept call button, so I pressed it and answered.

"Hello?"

To my surprise, the voice on the other end spoke Japanese. "Hello? Is that Jorge Joestar?" A young man's voice.

"Yep. You?"

"My name doesn't matter. You are...English, born in Japan?"

"I am. And you're Japanese, born in Italy?"

"....."

"What's your business?"

"I'm starting to like you."

"You are? Then come on down here. Let's talk face to face."

"Let's get down to business."

"You want to hire me?"

"? ...what do you mean?"

"Hire me as a detective?"

"I suppose?"

"Then tell me the name of my client. As a detective...you let people use you, you end up in a sticky situation. Get used to that fact, you start turning down any jobs where the client's identity isn't clear."

"....."

"If you don't tell me I'm hanging up."

"....." I waited a moment, then took the pebble away from my ear, and was about to hang up when I heard him laughing. A gentle, light laugh.

"Heh heh heh...very well. My name is Shiobana Haruno. Nikkei Italian. I usually go by Giorno Giovanna. Satisfied?"

"Yes. Thank you. Please proceed."

"I'd like you to look for someone. I don't know their real name. All I know is what they're called. Diavolo. The boss of the Passione Family."

...well, that was pretty much what I'd expected. "Is this person a Stand Master?" I asked.

".....we believe so."

"But neither I or the other two detectives can use a Stand, and we honestly know very little about them."

"We will provide you with an assistant."

"We can't choose who?"

"....."

"Didn't think so."

"The man with you is Bruno Buccellati. His team will be working with you. He'll lead, I'll be in charge of communications,

and the other three will each accompany one of you detectives."

"I see. Is there a time limit?"

"No."

"But our current situation can't last forever."

"No matter what the situation, no matter what happens, you must find Diavolo."

".....!?"

"Understand me? No matter what."

".....and if we can't?"

"There is no need to consider that."

"I see."

I was better off not thinking about it, yeah.

"So, Jorge Joestar, I look forward to your success."

He hung up. Bruno Buccellati stood up, and spoke to me in Italian. "You speak Italian, don't you?"

Shit, I thought, which was clearly a mistake. He laughed. "Heh heh. I can smell lies. Remember that. Even if you keep something hidden, the taste and scent may be weaker, but that's still a lie."

Three dangerous looking Italians came up behind him. They were all young.

"So?" I said. "I do speak Italian, but..."

Buccellati looked at the other two. "You both speak Italian as well, detectives?"

Both Daibakusho Curry and Runbaba 12 nodded. "Si, si."

High-level communication was a necessity in our line of work.

Buccellati assigned each of us one of his men.

Daibakusho Curry got Leone Abbacchio. Tall, with stern features, he loomed over that not especially tall Daibakusho Curry.

Runbaba got Guido Mista. Well-built, with a hat. Apparently he smelled a bit, since Runbaba 12 sniffed once, made a face, and

kept his distance.

I was assigned Narancia Ghirga. He was about the same age as me, with a boyish face, by the way he fixed me with a menacing glare suggested he was well aware of how young he looked. "Don't fuck with me," he hissed, and he made sure I knew he had a knife on him, too. Clearly, he was the most dangerous of this group.

So, time to go investigate. I kept the pebble, Daibakusho Curry took the rubber ball, and Runbaba 12 the orphaned shoe. Runbaba 12 tried to convince us to trade with him but Buccellati roared, "Enough!" and I looked at Narancia and saw someone standing next to him. It was Tsukumojuke.

".....!"

He grinned at me. "Hey! I am your instrument. A person needs your help. I'll take you to them."

He grabbed my shoulder.

"Yo, what the fuck?" Narancia yelled, pushing me aside and pointing his knife at Tsukumojuke. In that instant we jumped.

"Whoops. Brought an anomaly along, but...it all means something, I'm sure. Bye!"

Tsukumojuke vanished, leaving me and Narancia.

On the H.G. Wells, an American spacecraft launched by NASA. Passing around the dark side of Mars on its journey to the red planet, about to make a new discovery.

Namely, that, in addition to Phobos and Deimos, Mars had a previously undetected third moon. Previously undetected because Mars had always been between it and the Earth.

NINE
Cliff
崖

The second I arrived home from Rome, I was arrested for Kenton's murder. Her father, Ben Motorize, had many friends in the justice department, and he had strong-armed them into ignoring juvenile laws and charging me as an adult at age 16. With first degree murder.

My mother and Penelope came to see me in jail. Penelope burst into tears the moment she laid eyes on me.

"Jorge! Poor thing...I promise I'll get you out of here, Jorge! Oh, Jorge...!"

She was in such a state it rather rattled me. "But I'm fine, Penelope. Calm down. We can't have you losing control of your emotions, now." I did NOT need a locked room clown showing up here.

Both of them seemed rather surprised I wasn't more upset. "Eh...?" Penelope said, dubiously. "This doesn't bother you?"

"I've grown up a lot, you know. I got to keep it together."

"Hunh..."

My mother seemed equally concerned, but she said, "Well, I'm glad to hear it, Jorge. Still, we'll do everything we can to get you home soon. Don't you worry."

"Mm. Don't worry about me. I'm actually pretty comfortable here. Eh heh heh."

".....? You really do seem like you're OK." Still not quite believing it, mother and Penelope went on their way, but on the way back to my solitary cell – they were keeping me separated from the adult criminals – it was all I could do to stop myself from skipping. The guards hated it when I did that, so I forced myself to walk. I supposed this was what they meant by happy feet. I wanted to get back to my cell. The tiny cell at the very back.

Where Lisa Lisa was.

As we reached the cell the guard went bzzt and fell asleep on his feet. She'd paralyzed the thought centers of his brain, and he fell back to his normal routine, doing only things he didn't have to think about. Put the suspect in the cell, turn the key...just like he did

every day. His eyes saw Lisa Lisa and saw the state of our cell – we even had a refrigerator – but his mind failed to comprehend it. My mind remained unaffected because Lisa Lisa had given me socks that blocked the Hamon she was sending rippling through the floor. They were made from special thread from the uh... Smrtipologian Beetle, I think. Anyway, this weird bug's thread disperses Hamon.

"Welcome back, Jorge."

"Good to be back!"

"Mama Erina looked so worried at first. Thank goodness you were able to reassure her."

"Eh? You were watching?"

"Mm. I thought I might have to say I was with you if she looked too upset."

"Eh..." If mother found out about this she might very well say that jail was no place for a young lady and forbid her from staying.

"But reassure her you did," Lisa Lisa chuckled. "So I didn't say anything. Mama Erina and old man Speedwagon will take care of things, and the Hamon Warriors are helping too. I'm sure you'll be free in no time."

"Mmm..." I didn't really want to leave. With Lisa Lisa being nice enough to bring me food and snacks and clean the place and teaching me things this place was paradise. I didn't have to go to school, either. But I knew better than to tell her that.

Since Lisa Lisa had been with me almost since the moment I was arrested I had escaped all anxiety and fear. I knew I could rely on her utterly and completely. Watching her walk right into the jail with all the guards going bzzzt bzzzt bzzzt I completely forgot to be depressed.

"I'll get yelled at for using Hamon like this," she laughed. She was the best.

She left at night, though. "It wouldn't be appropriate," she said. I wouldn't do anything! ← ?

So alone at night I thought about Kenton Motorize. The girl

who got me to dream. Like a fairy riding on the back of a bird. Always smiling, prone to startling me with her sharp tongue, but she never once lied or hid her feelings. She was fun to be around.

But now she was dead.

On the morning of my sixth day in jail, Steven came to see me. Ehh? I thought. Maybe he thought I was the killer. I was scared to see him. But I wanted to see him. He'd lost his sister, and I wanted to give him my condolences. Maybe I wouldn't be able to do anything, maybe the words wouldn't form. But I should at least show myself, I thought. Kenton had been brutally stabbed 23 times in the gut and chest and face with a knife from my house and my plane had been with her. Even if it wasn't actually my fault I felt as if there should have been something I could have done to stop her from dying. But I was scared. Scared to face my friend's death head on, and scared to face a brother after his sister was murdered.

"Go, Jorge. Be with your friend the way I'm here with you."

Lisa Lisa promised to watch the visiting room from close by, so I gathered my nerve and went to see Steven.

Steven looked beside himself, and had lost so much weight I barely recognized him. I was almost at a loss for words, but I managed to say, "Kenton...it's too sad. Too horrible. I don't know what to say. The police suspect me but...obviously, I didn't do it."

"I believe you," Steven said. "You would never kill Kenton. But...I came to apologize. My father is convinced you did it, and is hell bent on taking all his rage out on you. I keep telling him you would never do something like that, but he needs to avenge her, and won't hear a word of it."

That was depressing. But I didn't let it show. "That's OK. Don't worry about me. Don't worry about anything else. Just mourn Kenton. I'm praying for you every night. Praying that she can find peace in heaven."

"....thank you. But Kenton was cut to pieces. I can't picture heaven or hell right now. I just don't understand why a girl like her would get murdered."

I had no answer.

"I hope we can fly together some day," Steven said. "I saw your plane. It was balanced well. You were almost ready to fly it."

"Ah..." I thought about the old Motorizing 5, reborn as the Star Shooter. If my weight was around 100 grams I'd have been able to fly it. It had made for a good kite. My plane had not just been left lying at the cliff where Kenton had been murdered. It had been tied to a rope, and flown, with Kenton's body and a rock as anchors. There was a strong wind off the sea and heavy rainfall weighing the plane down, but it had flown high anyway. That was why they'd found Kenton's body so quickly. Steven had seen the kite, and it led him to the horrible discovery of his sister's remains. I couldn't imagine how that must have felt.

"Doesn't seem like they're gonna let me fly," I said.

"Don't let yourself think like that, Jorge," Steven said, smiling. "If the two of us abandon planes...it'll feel like there's no proof Kenton even existed."

I remembered that at night, and cried in my cell.

Kenton loved planes. She loved flying. She was good at it, and never more beautiful. Even now I wasn't sure if I really liked planes, or just been entranced by the sight of her flying off that cliff.

Despite my mother's best efforts, I remained in jail, but it seemed like the police were having trouble building a case against me. To take the case to trial, they needed to get all their facts in order, but there were too many mysteries about Kenton's death.

First, nobody could figure out a timeline for my actions that allowed for the murder. After speaking to Darlington at the Motorize home, Faraday had led me to another room, and then I'd called from Rome two hours later. The only time unaccounted for was that two hours, and getting from Westwood, England to Rome, Italy in two hours was impossible to begin with. It was a four day

trip by rail or by sea, and even if we took the maximum flight distance of American planes and placed that end to end it would still take two days.

When the police questioned this, I answered, "Faraday took me to see a friend who should be dead, and when I took his hand I found myself in total darkness. I figured out that I was in a cave and climbed out of it and found myself in an underground ruin in Rome." That was mostly true, so I could explain it comfortably even though the police were trained to see through lies. I left Lisa Lisa out of it, and named a different underground ruin she'd suggested instead of the temple with the treasure room in it, but that underground ruin had not yet been officially discovered, so when the Italian police went to check it out it became a huge deal and if I hadn't gotten lost in there they'd never have known the ruin was even there, so it seemed like I was going to get away with lying about that part. In fact, if proven innocent there was talk of the Italian government giving me an award. I'd turned it down already, though. Lisa Lisa and the other Hamon Masters apparently knew everything that lay underground.

I could tell the police had no idea what to make of my nonsensical statement. They clearly couldn't write that down in their reports as is. They had Faraday's testimony, and proof from Rome, so despite what I was saying they couldn't doubt the fact of it. They had me undergo a psychological evaluation but whatever the result of it was, they still had to write a detailed account of how I could have killed Kenton Motorize in Westwood, England before traveling to Rome, Italy.

And that was hardly the end of the mess they had to make sense of.

I had no motive to kill Kenton. At all. She was one of the few friends I had in England; she and her brother were the only friends I had. I had liked her cheery disposition, the open way she spoke, and she'd taught me everything I knew about planes. This was the truth. But in their report, they said that I was in love with

Kenton, had said I would show her my plane to get her alone and ask her out, and had killed her when she turned me down. I had brought the knife with me planning to threaten her with it, and had tied the plane to her body and flown it to make her grave. "That isn't true," I said, over and over and over again. And learned it was useless to say anything to someone intent on bending the truth or outright lying to make things fit their needs.

Based purely on the estimated time of Kenton's death, it should have been difficult to believe I killed her. I arrived at the Motorize home at 3:30 PM, and Faraday led me to the other room around 4:00. But Steven had just arrived home when he saw the kite flying above the cliffs from the gate of the Motorize manor, around 4:10 PM. It was a twenty five minute trip by wagon from the Motorize manor to the scene of the crime. Two hours walking, and even if one were to run the whole way, it was a steady incline so it would take at least an hour. Kenton had been seen leaving school with an umbrella at around 3:30 PM, and if she had headed straight for the cliffs it would have taken her thirty minutes. When her body was found...Steven had seen the kite flying in the rain from his home, and afraid something had happened, had run his horse straight to the cliffs. According to his testimony, Kenton's body had still been warm, so the murderer must have killed Kenton on her way home, tied her body to my Star Shooter, and let it fly – all in the ten minute period between 4:00 and 4:10.

Just transporting the plane was a huge challenge. I'd been bringing Star Shooter back from the dead in my tent, and it was fully assembled; normally, transporting it would have meant taking it apart, carrying it to the cliffs, and then putting it together again. But from what Steven had seen, there weren't any new marks made on the body, so it would have been impossible for anyone without my knowledge of the plane's construction to take it apart and put it back together again. After all, I'd designed and built it myself. It was a mess of cobbled together bits and oddball parts. Which meant the killer must have transported it to the scene of the crime intact. It

was a glider with a ten meter wingspan; the cliffs were five kilometers from where the plane was kept, and the town center was right in the middle, so the killer would have had to take the long way around to avoid being seen.

Could they have flown it as a kite while moving it? If anyone saw a rope leading into the sky they'd wonder what was on the end of it. And the weight of one person would not have been enough to control Star Shooter once the wind caught it.

The fastest way to get it there would be to climb aboard and fly it, and the winds were strong enough that the winds passing through the tent had it almost at a hover. But like Steven said, the balance wasn't yet right, and it was impossible for it to carry anyone. Yet in the report, that was how I'd got the plane to the cliffs. I'd left school, came home, picked up a knife, flown Star Shooter to the Motorize manor, spoken to Darlington, snuck out of the house unseen, and then flown the plane to the cliffs. Kenton was waiting for me there, and when she rejected me, I stabbed her to death...

I denied everything, but the report was finished, and I was allowed to return home. I'd rather have stayed in jail, but I couldn't make Lisa Lisa dote on me forever, so I reluctantly went home. The Westwood jail guards were starting to have fits brought on by over-exposure to Lisa Lisa's Hamon anyway; their eyes would roll back in their heads, and they'd stop moving entirely, as if lost in a day dream. Lisa Lisa had a fiery temper, so I privately suspected she'd used Hamon that was a bit too strong.

Lisa Lisa accompanied me from the cell to the front door without anyone noticing, but once we reached the door she said, "OK, I'd better be off, then."

"Eh? You aren't coming home with me?"

"I've got work for Straits. I'd been playing hooky."

"What? I'll miss you."

"Don't do that, Jorge. You've got to find the strength within you. They're going to take you to trial. It's only going to get worse

from here."

I knew that but... "That's depressing."

"Come on, Jorge. Your friend was murdered, and they think you did it. 'Depressing' is hardly strong enough, is it?"

Good point. "Yeah..." I had to agree. I'd lost Kenton, and was probably losing Steven as well. "That's true..." And depending on how this trial went I could well lose everything that mattered to me.

I had to fight this.

"Thank you for everything, Lisa Lisa." She peered intently into my eyes. "I need to be stronger," I said. "I need to be strong enough to do this on my own."

"You don't need to be strong," Lisa Lisa said. "You just need to be a grown man."

"Then I'll aim for that. And be stronger that way."

"Mm. Don't think you need to do this on your own, Jorge. I'll come to help you again."

"But if I'm not strong like you..."

"Jorge, it's not like I can do everything on my own. I'm not strong at all. You're helping me just as much as I'm helping you."

"Eh!?"

My mind was filled with warm, fuzzy memories of our time together in jail, so I genuinely didn't know what she was talking about.

"When I was underground in Rome and terrified? You came to save me, Jorge. You helped me more than you can know. You might even have saved my life. There was that thing in the dark, remember? You noticed it too, right, Jorge?"

The gorilla spider.

Pffffffffffffffffffffffffft.....ffffbbbbbtttt.

"Yeah, I did."

"I still have no idea what that thing was, but I know it was after me. Just as it was about to attack me, you showed up and protected me, Jorge."

I did? "Yeah, but it's not like I was brave or anything..."

"My point is, Jorge, finding people you can rely on gives you strength. Whether or not they can actually be relied upon is beside the question."

I went home. Mother and Penelope welcomed me, we ate dinner, and I went to my room. At last I could think, not about Kenton, but about Tsukumojuku.

When I'd seen him floating just off the ground in the Motorize manor, it was definitely Tsukumojuku, alive, but not in any way normal.

I'm currently in Japan, in the year 2012. I'm there with a different you – a Japanese boy completely unlike you, but also named Jorge Joestar. I've been transported to a place called the Arrow Cross House, and I've gotten caught up in another case.

That meant Tsukumojuku didn't die on the boat; instead he time traveled to Japan 107 years into the future. I thought this was a good thing. Japan was at war with Russia, and while the Japanese forces were on the offensive, Russia's Baltic fleet would probably annihilate them soon. Once they'd turned the tables and Japan had surrendered, and Korea was securely under Russian control, they'd clearly attempt to conquer Japan as well, which might have spelled trouble for Tsukumojuku. He was once again my only friend, so I was glad to hear he was in a world without war. And with another me. Was that Jorge Joestar descended from me? Then why was he in Japan? Would the Joestars move to Japan some day? How would something like that happen? Did something happen in England? Would England go to war with Russia? Would they annex Japan as a protectorate?

I didn't know anything about war. Everything I knew about time travel came from the novel by H.G. Wells. I couldn't imagine what the world 107 years in the future was like.

But at least I knew one thing for sure. Tsukumojuku had not

drowned to death. The thought made me want to go look for him, made me feel like I had to find out what had happened to him. As his former partner.

But what could I do?

The boat Tsukumojuku was on sank off the coast of Florida. I couldn't travel to America to look into it, not now that'd been charged with first degree murder. If I left the country they'd think I was running for it.

And would there even be any evidence of time travel? Even if there was, would I be able to recognize it? Even if there was some clear and amazing proof that time travel had happened here what could I do with that? Did I really think I could chase after Tsukumojuku to the world 107 years in the future?

Tsukumojuku was a genuinely special person. I was normal. There were many, many things I couldn't do, and I was still only sixteen. And I had to deal with these murder charges first.

...he'd said he would probably meet me again someday. I would just have to wait for that.

What was it he'd said, exactly?

The nature of my name suggests that we'll meet again, one more time.

His name? What did that mean?

He'd said something about the kanji. I remembered the Japanese dictionary he'd given me. I looked it up, but there wasn't any special meaning. 九 and 十 were just 9 and 10.

I'd been charged, but since I was pleading innocent we had to have a jury trial. In the opening statements the prosecutor spouted nonsense, and the supposedly amazing lawyer mother hired made a counter argument to the jury, dismantling the prosecutor's theory. Witnesses were called, questioned, cross-examined, and questioned again, and this seemed to be taking a while. Since I couldn't go to school while the trial was going on I had to study at

home, so once again Penelope became my tutor. She explained everything very well, so my studies went quickly, and I had more free time. I was bored, and I didn't feel like mucking around with planes. But if I went into town I'd run into classmates or maybe even members of the Motorize family. What was happening to me was so freaky I couldn't concentrate on reading. I'd liked messing around with planes and I had a lot of tools lying around, so I was wondering what else could keep my hands busy when mother came home and stepped out of the automobile she was using at work and I found my new toy.

Motor cars!

Vrooom! Hell yeah!

I immediately asked to get a license. However, you couldn't get a driver's license until you were seventeen. The world definitely seemed to think cars were for grown ups, but my mother was never one to care about such things, and let me do as I pleased. I got the man who drove her to work and back to teach me how to drive, and I had the hang of it in no time. They were much easier to control than airplanes. They were built to be easy to drive.

I bought a car. A Rover 8. A two-seater that I immediately took apart and considered trying to customize, but all the parts were hand made and replacements weren't easily available and unlike when I'd been messing around with planes with Steven Motorize I didn't have a teacher and was doing everything by myself so I took a few parts off and looked and then put them back and looked, trying to figure out how engines worked, but of course it broke. Wha ha ha. I was never actually that good at this stuff. No reason I would be.

So I took it to an automotive garage in London and then I met a college student named John Moore-Brabazon.

One glance at John told you he was someone. He wore an expensive suit poorly and stumped around the garage floor scowling at every car like a particularly bold thief but as I watched he suddenly took the engine out of one car and started switching the

wheels on another, doing whatever he liked without any of the other mechanics saying anything so I asked and it turned out he actually owned all seven cars in the place and I thought wow, even the aristocrats don't have that many how rich is this dude? Apparently he was private mechanic to a man named Charles Rolls who owned an automotive company. So four of the seven cars in here he owned for work-related research and the remaining three were test designs given to him by his boss, and nobody but him was allowed to touch any of them. Gosh, that sounded fun. When I heard he was still a student I knew there were incredible people in this world. I stood watching him poke at this and that walking from car to car as the whim or idea struck him, taking pieces out, changing them, taking things apart, putting them back together. I was having so much fun watching him I forgot my original plan to learn something about how cars actually work and just watched in sheer admiration of his handiwork. A shockwave was running slowly through me. It seeped to my core much like my first meeting with Kenton Motorize, but not just that; it also reminded me of when I first met Tsukumojuku, and I was beginning to get the hazy idea that was I on the verge of another life change.

So when John noticed me and spoke, I just thought it was happening again.

And then he yelled, "Quit staring at my ass, motherfucker!"

Eh? What did he just say? "I wasn't fucking looking!"

"Who the fuck is this brat?" "Who you calling brat! You're just sponging off your rich friend!" "I earned that shit with my own two hands! I bet your parents just bought you that car, didn't they? Shitbird." Clang! He'd thrown a wrench at my Rover 8 so I totally lost it. "What the fuck are you doing!?" I yelled and considered fucking up his cars but it seemed like a waste so I didn't and instead shoved John out of the way and opened up the Rover 8's engine room and started fixing the broken part and was so mad I could see how to fix the part I couldn't figure out how to fix early so I fixed it myself and then banged the dent John's wrench had made out from

the inside until you couldn't tell it had ever been there jumped into the driver's seat, looked over at John who was staring at me with his mouth open and yelled, "I'm gonna run you over, so stand still!" Bang! Brrrrrrrr the engine started up and I hit the accelerator and really tried to run him over and wound up chasing after John but he yelled, "Fuck that!" and run out of the shop and jumped into an working eighth car he had parked out front and drove away and we ended up in a car chase through the industrial district. But it wasn't a contest at all. John's car was twice as fast as mine and it just went shoop shoop away from me and ran circles around me and he shouted insults as my eyes filled with tears. Lots of childish shit like sticking his tongue out and nananabooboo and I got even more pissed off but couldn't catch him. John laughed his ass off, "Let's play tag through all of London!" he yelled, and in a corner of my mind I thought shit, if I get arrested it'll fuck up the trial but I couldn't stop myself. "Fuck you! Just die!" and we shot out of the factory startling horses and pedestrians and I followed as he dodged everything perfectly and was impressed despite myself. By the time the mounted police started chasing us I was laughing. Even though it would be really bad if they caught me. I was having fun. I'd been bullied my whole life and never been much of a fighter and while I'd let it bottle up inside me until I exploded and took a swing at someone a few times, John had pulled the rage out of me so easily the curses just spilled off my tongue. It felt amazing. Liberating. To think I could talk like this! That I could trade blows instead of snapping!

Later, John and I went back to the garage and the worried mechanics shook their heads at us but soon we were all laughing and John and I were friends. It wasn't the way I'd imagined but my life had, indeed, changed again. John was a member of the Royal Automobile Club, and its star.

To me, he was a magician. I mean, everything he turned his hands to not only got fixed, it worked better than he had before. If he sat in the driver's seat, that car would run and turn like never

before. If he drove off in it and came back, when he stepped out of it the entire vehicle would look polished to a new level of beauty. When he raced, he was less interested in winning than in enjoying himself to the fullest; the results were too inconsistent for gamblers, but as a spectator his performance was full of gasp-inspiring moves and previously unheard of strategic maneuvers. The other drivers considered him one of the best.

As the only one of his friends younger than him, John quite liked me, but that often got me in trouble. John was very good at making fun of people, and every time I saw him he'd come after me so tenaciously that I'd wind up fighting back tears. But I put up with it, and kept chasing after him and my own race results gradually improved, and people started to notice me, but the more people knew me the more they knew about him. Most people avoided me after finding out I was on trial for murder.

"Who cares if you killed her or not?" John said.

No, no, no, no, no. "It matters!" I said, but I knew what he meant. The truth didn't change our relationship.

I was almost touched by this, but then he added, "Besides, if war starts most men'll wind up killers. But we'll all go on living as if that's normal."

What was he talking about? "Then just don't go to war," I said.

John laughed. "You're a fool, Jorge. The next war's gonna be way bigger than any before. Battlefields, soldiers, and weapons."

I didn't know what he meant, but he was right. I had never really had a knack for politics or international intrigue.

When Japan utterly destroyed the Baltic Fleet, sinking damn near every ship in it and emerging victorious over Russia I thought, "Daaamn, Japan," but I just wasn't that interested in Japan as long as Tsukumojuku wasn't there.

I was sick to death of trials.

I mean, the police had a bullshit report and the trial was based on that bullshit and nobody involved believed a word of it so there was no way they'd ever be able to convince anyone to believe a word of it. Not once had they managed to get all twelve jurors to buy into the bullshit so they kept returning hung juries and starting over, and the third time they finally got a not guilty verdict and before I could even breathe a sigh of relief the attorney general declared there were grounds to overturn the not guilty verdict and the trial continued in the appellate court. And so I turned seventeen and eighteen still under suspicion, graduated Hugh Hudson High without ever going back, and refused to go to college despite mother and Penelope's pleas. After all, not one good thing had ever happened to me in school.

And I was finally starting to give John a run for his money in RAC races, and automobile technology was advancing like you wouldn't believe, and a year before John's boss Rolls had put out the Silver Ghost, which could do 80 kph without any noise and a guy named Ford in America had started mass producing his T series and this was the age of cars, baby! And here I was, right at the side of the center of the heart of that fire and John went off to a circuit race in the Ardennes in Belgium and hopped in a Minerva and drove 600 kilometers in six hours fourteen minutes and five seconds and won. Trapped back in England I got a call from John afterward.

"Hey! We're doing planes next."

Ehhhhhhhhhh!?

John and John's boss, Charles Rolls, were basically all about adventure. Rolls had decided his company was gonna start making airplane engines, and John was super into it, too. I'd mentioned playing around with airplanes before Kenton's murder, and John said, "Maybe you're better at airplanes than you are cars." Which irritated the shit out of me but I ended up getting back into planes

too, and that made me want to talk to Steven Motorize again.

I couldn't exactly just go ring the doorbell at the Motorize manor, but Steven had never really come to school that much and didn't seem to have any friends to speak of, and since I had stopped going to school entirely I wouldn't have known who to ask anyway, so for lack of any other options I asked my mother, who said, "He left home and is working in France somewhere." She didn't seem to know anything more. I could have looked into it further but if he was out of the country then I couldn't exactly go see him and this wasn't really the sort of thing you talked about over the phone so I was starting to give up when Penelope asked, "What do you want with Steven Motorize?"

She sounded weirdly pissed. "Uh, John and everyone are starting to get into planes now," I said.

"Hunh? Planes?Jorge, don't do that. I can't see anything good coming from planes."

"Eh? But John's already made up his mind."

"Jeez! John, John, John! You let your friends control every action you take? Every time you meet someone you stop thinking about anything else. It's creepy!"

Oh dear. Creepy, hunh? "...is it?" I could kinda see how it might be. I'd done the same thing with Tsukumojuku. I was pretty bad at making friends, so wound up being super devoted to the ones I did make.

"...I mean, I guess you did that with me, too. But I worry, you know?" Penelope said, and now I was a little worried two, and then a couple of days later Darlington Motorize came to the Joestar mansion.

I hadn't seen her since the day her sister Kenton was killed.

The last two years had aged Darlington out of her old sweet

and gentle disposition. That had been replaced with an intimidating formidability. "Hello. I apologize for the sudden visit," she said, politely.

"Uh, sure...it's been a while," I said, at a loss for words.

"We need to talk. Do you have a minute?"

"Yeah, I guess. ...should we step outside?"

It was the weekend, and Penelope was here. If the two of them saw each other it would lead to trouble, I thought.

"Let's," Darlington agreed. "It's high time the two of us spoke. We haven't even seen each other all this time."

We stepped into the beech woods out back, but Darlington didn't actually say anything.

Finally, I broke the silence. "I know it's a bit late now, but I was very sad to hear about Kenton."

Darlington's expression didn't change. She didn't respond at all. She just kept walking, so I said nothing else.

We walked away through the dappled light of the woods. At last, Darlington said, "You remember William Cardinal?"

? Where'd that come from? "Sorry, who?"

"My boyfriend."

"Oh...the athlete who was very smart and going to be a doctor but really wanted to be writer?"

Darlington seemed surprised that I'd remembered all of that, but she was no more surprised than I was. "Quite the memory you have there," she said.

"I guess it came as quite a shock," I said, intending it to cover the awkwardness but it felt uncomfortably close to the truth.

"Eh? To you?" Darlington said. I didn't blame her. "Why?"

"Well...like I said then, it felt like you were suddenly attacking me. I was scared."

"Sorry. I was just a confused little girl back then. Still am."

She seemed to have grown up a lot to me.

"No, I had no reason to react like I did, either. Anyone has the right to their opinion of any novel, or any person."

"But it was bad form on my part to tell you something mean someone said about you."

"....." I didn't disagree with that. "It doesn't matter now. I never imagined I'd speak to you again. Even without what happened to Kenton. But I'm glad to see you. Thanks for coming."

"....."

"So what about Mr. Cardinal?"

"He's saying he's going to enlist before becoming a doctor. Wants to be a commissioned officer. He's good at motivating people. He might be a better commander than a doctor."

"Hunh. No more novels?"

"He hasn't spoken about that lately."

"But you're still seeing him."

"I am."

"Oh."

"That disappointed look on your face suggests I've given you the impression he isn't a good man."

"Well...maybe."

"So...I don't want this to seem like another sudden attack, but I've been thinking about it for a long time. Do you mind?"

"Eh?go ahead."

"William is hardly a perfect man. He can be shallow and boring, and tactless but I think he's far better than you."

"Eh....I mean, I'm not gonna argue that he's not a better or more normal person than I am, but..."

"Listen. You have a way of getting all the girls around you to look at you."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Don't deny it."

"I really don't know what you mean."

"Then think about it."

"Eh....?"

"That's what I wanted to point out. For two years now."

"Eh.....? Sorry."

"You're too quick to apologize. You don't even understand what I'm talking about."

"No..."

"What's worst about you is that you don't even realize what you're doing, and that you aren't actually looking for romance with any of the girls you lead on. You've already got someone for that. You always have."

"Eh.....?"

Oh. I knew what that meant. It meant I was pathetic.

We walked through the woods in silence a while. Then we went back to the house, and Penelope's voice came down from the stairs over the entrance hall like thunder. "What is that woman doing here!?"

"Hello, Miss de la Roza," Darlington said calmly. They clearly already knew each other.

"Your family is trying to frame Jorge for murder! How dare you come here!"

"That's what I came to talk about."

"Even if you drop the charges now, it won't get Jorge these two years back!"

Eh!? I thought. Oh, I guess that was also a possibility! But before the thought could cheer me up Darlington shook her head.

"I'm afraid there's no chance of that happening. Truth is, the reason I came here is because my father has found new evidence that seems like it will dislodge the trial from this quagmire. Jorge, I think you had better look into the possibility of a plea bargain. Unofficially, of course."

A plea bargain? What?

"Hunnnnhhh!?" Penelope roared. I could hear a faint rustle, as if the furniture on the porch and the trees outside and the ground itself were all advancing on Darlington.

Shit. Penelope was summoning her locked room clown.

"What!? You're telling Jorge to plead guilty!? In exchange for a reduced sentence?"

Whaaat!?

"Calm down and think about it, Miss de la Roza. This new evidence will shift things in favor of a guilty verdict. This trial... everyone knows it's only happening because Ben Motorize wants revenge. The case is a mess. Everyone involved is just willing it into whatever shape they can. And once my father makes up his mind about something he sees it through to the end. He always gets his way. And he just found a major puzzle piece that'll make that happen this time. The judge...look, this is super off the record and all, but it's almost public knowledge he's absolutely over the moon about this new evidence. If they find Jorge guilty, the story they have about him preparing a weapon and asking her out only to be rejected? The sheer selfishness of that motive, followed by the elaborate steps he supposedly went to to obscure the truth...he'll be given the maximum sentence allowed. You'll be in prison for a long, long time, Jorge."

But then I could live in prison with Lisa Lisa. That was my first thought, but a moment later I realized how pathetic that was, and felt dizzy. I was certain Lisa Lisa would come with me to prison; it's not like I wanted that to happen but if it did it wouldn't be that bad, and knowing that made me willing to accept it. That's how fucked up my mind was. I was prepared to waste Lisa Lisa's life just to ease my loneliness, lessen my fear, and calm my anxiety. I wasn't just pathetic; I wasn't even a man. I was scum.

I couldn't allow myself to go to prison, I thought. Lisa Lisa would absolutely come there with me, and if nothing changed I would be unable to tell her not to. As time passed trapped in that tiny world I was sure I would convince myself it wasn't that bad.

Don't make girls protect you.

Darlington had just told me that. I had to tattoo those words on my very bones. I had to win my innocence. "Darlington," I said.

"What is this new evidence?"

"....."

"Please. You don't really believe I actually killed Kenton, do you?" I'd never asked her that before, and when she didn't answer I started getting nervous. She'd met me that day at the Motorize house...did their timeline actually seem believable to her? Or was this new evidence that decisive?

At last she spoke.

"...they found two witnesses. They'll testify that they saw a plane fly out of your garden, and that they saw a plane hidden in our garden. These aren't false witnesses my father hired, Jorge."

For a moment, my legs went wobbly. Their timeline had been nothing but a guess. Now they had evidence to prove part of it. That would definitely have an impact on the trial.

"How do you know they aren't false witnesses?"

From the top of the stairs Penelope yelled, "Stop it, Jorge! Get away from that woman!"

The entrance hall shattered around Darlington, and dirt rose up around her, forming new walls around Darlington. I took a step closer to her, placing myself inside the walls. The moment the locked room was done the clown would appear to hang Darlington and me. "Jorge! Get out of there!" I ignored Penelope, and kept my eyes on Darlington.

"Because the witnesses are me," Darlington said. "And the woman on the stairs."

".....! What!?"

"That crazy lady's been keeping quiet about what she saw, because she thought it would be bad for you. So have I. Jorge, your plane flew away from here at 3:00 PM, and landed at my house at 3:30 PM. I...and the lady building dirt walls around us with some mysterious power... We'll be called to the witness stand. She might deny everything. But they've already found alternative proof."

"Proof? What is it?"

"She stopped by the house on her way home from work, and

saw the plane you could never get to fly flying away. What do you think she did?"

".....?"

"She wrote a note congratulating you. 'Congrats on Star Shooter's first flight, Jorge! Won't the rain be a problem? Make sure you show me next time, P!' On memo paper from work. With Star Mark Trading's logo printed at the top."

".....!" I turned around, saw a mix of anger and panic on Penelope's face, and knew what Darlington said was all true, that Penelope really had seen Star Shooter fly away, and that the plane really had not been taken apart, but that someone had climbed aboard and flown it out of here.

"Jorge, you idiot!" Fed up with trying to get me to leave the locked room, Penelope left the top of the stairs, ran down the hall, and we could hear the door to her room slam. With her gone, the dirt room stopped growing just before it sealed itself off.

"This is amazing," Darlington said. I looked, and there was a clown made of bits of our porch standing there, a rope made from grass from our yard in its hands, looking like it was about to slip that garrote around Darlington's neck. There was another rope slung over its shoulder for me.

"Sorry," I said. But Darlington did not seem upset. "You weren't scared?"

"She wouldn't really try to kill me. And I'm not the type to give in to a threat. And I know someone else with a sad power like hers."

"?oh.....Steven?"

The wound wings.

But Darlington ignored the question. "Well, I'd better go. Jorge, think about the plea bargain. Seriously, thank about it." She turned to the walls. "Should I just break it?" she said, and gave it a push. It crumbled away around the hole she'd made, all four walls falling to pieces until there was nothing but a giant hole in the entrance hall. "Bye."

And with that, Darlington was gone, and I went upstairs to Penelope. She was lying on her bed, crying.

I didn't know what to say. Thinking of what she'd hidden the last two years, and how it must have weighed on her, I could never begin to express my gratitude in words. And now that it had all been in vain, and the truth had come out, and she was crying, I knew I could never comfort her. I could never her cheer her up with empty words like 'It'll be OK'. I would be found guilty. Penelope knew that, and that's why she was crying, and that fact was starting to sink into my thick head as well. The weight of it stole the power of speech from me.

I didn't know how plea bargains worked, but perhaps we should think about it. Perhaps we should focus on getting a reduced sentence. But I hadn't killed Kenton Motorize. Was this really accepting reality?

As I stood there silently, I heard a voice behind me.

"Heavens, what is going on here?" I turned around, and found my mother standing at the doorway. "Jorge, have you given up already?"

".....eh.....? What.....?"

"...you can drive cars and you may soon fly planes, but are you actually still a child? Think."

"Um...but the situation's hopeless."

"So? You've given up?"

"...what else can I do?"

"It's your life. Think for yourself."

"....." Wouldn't it all be settled if I just accepted it?

As the lamest thought to ever be thought ran through my head, mother said, "When you give up, it won't just be your reputation that's damaged. The Joestar family name, the Pendleton family name, the Star Mark Trading company name, the name of the Royal Automobile Club you joined, and the name of anyone who befriended and introduced you, like John Moore-Brabazon. And that's not all. You'd be betraying Penelope and my feelings,

betraying Lisa Lisa's faith in you, and betraying that detective you were friends with, Tsukumojuku. You'd hurt Steven and Darlington Motorize as well. But above all you'd insult poor dead Kenton Motorize. Does none of that matter to you?"

"It matters! All of it does!" I blurted. She was right. Giving up meant ignoring the consequences. How could I ever consider that not worth it?

Penelope had stopped crying, and sat up. She was staring at me, tears drying on her cheeks.

"It matters," I said, again. But what could I do about it? I didn't voice that thought. I had to think. Shit! I'd spent too much of my life relying on everyone else. My brain wouldn't budge. But that was just another way of giving up. Think! "So...I have to prove my own innocence," but I couldn't just say that and have it be true. It didn't matter what the hell I felt I wanted to do. How could I go about proving I was innocent? It was patently obvious I could never have killed her. I was in fucking Rome! But that was just another dead end. If I let myself get stuck here I'd just chase my own tail around for hours. I had proven I was in Rome, and clinging to that fact was just being defensive. I had to go on the attack. Bring the fight back to them.

But how?

The police report was a complete fake. They were trying to make everyone believe a lie. We'd already made all the points we had to make. They'd managed to get everyone to ignore what we had to say. Repeating the same thing would get us nowhere. If they had new evidence, then we had to bring something new to the table as well. But what?

There was only one true version of my actions that day. But that argument wasn't getting us anywhere. So I had to think of something else. Something not about me.

I couldn't think of anything...but the reason I thought that was because I was thinking about what I could do. What I thought I could do what less than what I could actually do. Because I was

pathetic like that. I could do more than that, but it was easier not to. Did I really believe I couldn't do anything?

I wasn't sure, so I'd better think about what I should do, figure out what was needed to get me out of this mess. I had to prove that I hadn't done it. But how?

"Find the real killer," I said.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I started shaking like a leaf. Ohhhhhhhhhhh! I could feel a hot flash riding up the inside of my thighs. I had spent all that time with the great detective Tsukumojuku. When I was with him I had never once tried to solve anything myself but I would have to imitate what he'd done. I had seen first hand how he went about it, how he thought his way through all those mysteries. I could do this. Could I?

No. I had to. Everything around me was depending on it.

"That's right," mother said. "That's also what Darlington wanted to say. Didn't you realize?"

"Ah...." Oh. That was why she had come all this way to tell me. Of course Darlington would never believe I'd done it. And it was totally out of character for her to suggest pleading guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence.

I'm not the type to give in to a threat.

She'd said that because I seemed like I was about to give in to one.

"Worst comes to worst, I'll tell everyone I did it, so you just do the best you can," Penelope said, and I gaped at her.

"You can't, Penelope," mother said, angrily.

Penelope just stared back at her. "I mean it."

Jesus, I thought. How pathetic was it that I was making a girl say something like that? My whole life I'd been saved by girls. I had to do this.

"I swear I'll find the real killer."

"I'll help!" Penelope said, jumping excitedly to her feet. I hesitated a bit, remembering Darlington's line, **Don't make girls protect you.** But I also remembered what Lisa Lisa said, and let her help.

Finding people you can rely on gives you strength. Whether or not they can actually be relied upon is beside the question.

Behaving properly meant people trusted you, tried to help you. The more people like that you had, the more you could accomplish. Instead of letting them do everything for you, you just had to do the best you could and people would naturally step up to help you out.

Penelope got mother to give her leave from work so she could focus on assisting me. Since I was finally interested, she told me she'd actually been investigating the murder of Kenton Motorize for the last two years. Not only solidifying details that would be needed for the trial, but also chasing the killer's actions. Since Darlington had leaked us info (admittedly, disguised as a threat) she now knew that Star Shooter had gone to the Motorize manor after leaving our place. It had not been taken apart for transport. Flying it like a kite would have attracted attention, and the winds were too strong. So someone must have been inside Star Shooter as it flew. But who could possibly do that?

I saw your plane. It was balanced well. You were almost ready to fly it, Steven had said, when he came to visit me. It could fly, just not support the weight of an adult.

So a child? I thought, and remember how Faraday had described Tsukumojuku. **He looked like a young boy, primary or middle school.** Come to think of it, I'd noticed that Tsukumojuku was floating. What if he'd been flying Star Shooter?

He was a detective, and anything he tried his hand at he

quickly mastered as if he'd been doing it for years. He could have learned to fly a glider in no time. Yeah. He'd come to see me. Or... wait. He'd said he'd come there for me, and he'd come to where I was, but he'd come from 107 years in the future...if he was coming to see me from that far away would he be able to arrive exactly where I was, at the Motorize manor? Wouldn't he have stopped by the Joestar mansion first? Then once he discovered I was out, he would have been able to use his detective skills to quickly ascertain my location, and borrowed my airplane...because he was in a hurry. He had to join my hand with Lisa Lisa's. That was how Darlington had come to see Star Shooter abandoned at the Motorize Manor!

But of course Tsukumojuku would never have murdered Kenton Motorize. But the airplane had been found on the cliffs. So perhaps...

Perhaps after moving me to Rome and Lisa Lisa, he had not vanished immediately, but climbed aboard Star Shooter once again. And flown to the cliffs. Where he found Kenton's corpse. In the rain on a deserted cliff. Unable to report his discovery in person, he had flown my plane as a kite to ensure she was discovered quickly. Which Steven did.

Hmm, it made a certain kind of sense. In other words, the one who murdered Kenton and the one who moved the plane were different people.

Forget the plane. My target had to be the murder itself.

Once again we started at the Joestar mansion. Following the movements of the knife with the Joestar crest on it. This had been assumed to travel with the airplane, causing confusion, but for now I was assuming it had moved separately. "Do we believe our knife was stolen the day of the crime?" I asked.

Penelope nodded. "That's been verified. It was stolen while the Joestar mansion housekeeper was on her afternoon break. The police checked into it, but it was an old knife, sharpened regularly over the years, and the sheen of the blade and a few small marks on it proved it was ours."

Tch. If there was any chance it had been missing earlier and simply not noticed that would mean it and the plane didn't share start and end points. But if that was the truth, then oh well. That meant that Tsukumojuku and the killer trying to frame me for Kenton's murder must have been on our property at the same time. That thought reminded me of something.

Are you in some sort of danger right now?

Tsukumojuku had asked me that. Turned out he was right. I was. His mysterious power had sensed it, and brought him to me, and transported me to Rome. And thanks to that the killer's plan had been thwarted for at least the last two years. If I had simply gone home after speaking to Darlington I'd have been trapped completely in his web, and thrown in jail without a second thought.

Someone was out to get me.

Crap. That was a scary thought. I had to find them quick.

How had the knife been moved? It was an hour and a half by foot from my house to the scene of the crime. If he'd planned to kill Kenton, then he would have started by making sure Kenton left the gates of the school, but there wasn't enough time. She left school at 3:30 PM. She was killed, at the latest, at 4:10 PM. In that forty minutes the murder happened, and Tsukumojuku found the body, tied the glider to it like a kite, and then Steven saw it and came running. Hmm. Something about that seemed wrong.

Had it been pure coincidence that Tsukumojuku found her body? He was a detective. He might have had a reason to head up the cliff. Was he already thinking about it when he met me in the Motorize manor? Or did he discover it after sending me to Rome? If he had known something, why hadn't he mentioned it to me? And he wouldn't have asked if I was in danger! He'd have been more specific. Something had happened after I vanished. Something was hidden in the Motorize home that led him to suspect Kenton was murdered.

...however, that had been my first and last time entering the main building, so I had no idea what that could be. On the other

hand, that would go for Tsukumojuku as well, I thought. Keep thinking. Get back to the knife.

Once Kenton had left school it was too late, so they must have come to get the knife first, and then gone to kill Kenton on the cliff, which meant they already knew where Kenton was going that day. Who could possibly have guessed that Kenton would have gone to the cliff in that downpour? Kenton had told Steven she was going to meet me, apparently, but who had lied to her about me wanting to meet there? They must be the killer, but they had to be someone I'd pick to give her the message. There were very few people who knew that Kenton and I were close, and would think it was normal for the two of us to meet on the cliff. All of those people were very close to Kenton, too.

Or, I thought, perhaps meeting me was a lie Kenton herself invented.

I didn't think Kenton had a boyfriend or anything, but would I have known if she had? No, I couldn't imagine any secret boyfriend would have called her to the cliff. Kenton would have seen that cliff as a place for the three of us.

I was stuck again, so I went back to the knife. I still couldn't explain it at all. Were there any other clues?

"Penelope, about the knife...did they find anything else belonging to the killer?" As I asked, I had an idea. "Footprints, for example?" It had been raining that day, so it seemed likely there were tracks left when he entered the house.

But Penelope shook her head. "None. The police and I both looked...but there was something strange. We found drops of rain water from an open window down the hall into the kitchen. But no footprints. Like he'd been floating in the air."

Well, that just made me think of Tsukumojuku again, but no, no, he had nothing to do with Kenton's murder.

"Which reminds me, there were no footprints but yours in or around your tent, Jorge. That's one reason why they suspected you."

Ah, that's because Tsukumojuku was floating...him again.

He could have done it, and that would avoid the absurd coincidence of two people with different motives in the same place at the same time. Was there no chance that Tsukumojuku had taken the knife?

I couldn't imagine he'd actually murdered Kenton, but given that he'd traveled through time to see me was it really out of the question that he'd taken a knife from my house?

To protect himself? No, that didn't work. Tsukumojuku had guessed that I was in danger. Perhaps he had taken the weapon to help him protect me.

Then what happened? He flew Star Shooter to the Motorize manor. I seemed fine. He left the house without using the knife, got on Star Shooter, and found Kenton while he was flying. She was dead. He couldn't report the discovery himself, so he turned Star Shooter into a kite to call people to her, and left the knife there knowing full well it would be mistaken for the murder weapon? It just didn't make any sense.

I decided to force the hypothetical a step farther. Was there really no chance that Tsukumojuku had murdered Kenton? What if Kenton had been the threat to me he had mentioned?

No, no, that didn't work. Kenton was my friend. Even if she wasn't, she wasn't the kind of girl to do anything horrible to anybody. Ever. But that meant Tsukumojuku didn't take the knife, either. Which meant the knife's movements were a mystery again.

Since I was just sitting there thinking in silence, Penelope asked, "Jorge, are we done with the footprints?"

"Ah, yeah. Sorry, I was just thinking about why Kenton Motorize would have gone to the cliff."

"Oh, I did look into that, but nothing really stood out. I've questioned the students at her school. But her classmates all say there was nothing out of the ordinary that day. They all thought Kenton Motorize was a little odd to begin with; she never really talked to anybody else, and even though she was attractive and well-known the boys had pretty much given up on asking her out.

They didn't notice anything different that day...although the kids I spoke to were a little surprised about one thing. The school was asking about her plans for the future, and she'd said she was hoping to get a job after school ended. Like, she's got a title, why would she need a *job*?"

Hunh, I thought. I'd sort of assumed she would go on living in the Motorize manor, flying planes with Steven. But the times were changing, and maybe Kenton had more ambitious ideas.

"At any rate, it's much too deserted a spot for someone to call her too, and it's too far away. Would any girl really go to a place like that alone? She ended up getting killed, but I can't imagine she'd agree to meet someone she thought might kill her in a place like that," I said.

Penelope agreed with me vehemently. "Yes! Exactly!"

"Arghhhhhh, I dunno! I can't think of any reason why Kenton would have gone there!" I groaned.

"Then why not go?" Penelope suggested.

"? Where?"

"To the cliff. We're just sitting here thinking, but perhaps we should start by visiting the scene of the crime?"

I felt sure Tsukumojuku had often said the same thing, but it had slipped my mind entirely.

Two years since I'd been to these cliffs. A lot of memories here. This hill wasn't actually Motorize property or anything, but I found myself glancing over my shoulder as if Steven might show up at any minute. The slope down from the cliff top was gentle; there was a little forest at the bottom, and beyond that I could see the roof of the Motorize manor. Steven wasn't there, I knew. **He left home and is working in France somewhere.**

"This is where Kenton's body was found," Penelope said, pointing at a large rock. Star Shooter's rope had been tethered to that rock and to Kenton's body. I knew that rock; it was hard to

believe anything so grisly had happened here. But that's where Steven found her body. Kenton had been stabbed twenty-three times in the face and body, and tied to this rock, positioned so she was looking down at the Motorize home. When Steven found her, she was still warm; she'd been killed not long before. Running that through my mind, something tugged at my mind again. Just like it had back at the house, when I was sitting with Penelope, thinking. Something wasn't right. Something was bugging me.

What? When? Where?

Tsukumojuku had flown Star Shooter up here, seen Kenton, and tied the glider to her as a signal. Steven had seen it, and ridden his horse up here. Somewhere in there. But what was it that was bothering me about that?

Steven's horse. Steven had ridden a horse to find his sister's dead body? He might have started out on horseback...I looked back down the hill. On his way up the hill from the house, Steven would have been able to see the top of the cliff, see her body long before he got here. It was a gentle slope all the way to their house. With the plane as a guide, even in the rain, he'd have seen her the second he left the woods. But if he saw Kenton lying there, why wouldn't he have sprouted wings?

He would have. He always grew those wings when he was in a hurry to save someone. He wouldn't have wasted five or ten minutes riding up the slope when he could be at his sister's side in a single swoop. Of course not. He would have grown them if he needed to. Steven didn't mention that specifically, but it was a minor detail. Not important. Or was it? He'd spoken to me face to face but didn't mention his wings. Wasn't that odd? I thought about it some more. Then a thought struck me.

Tsukumojuku wasn't the only one who could float above the ground. Steven Motorize could also have flown my plane.

What was I thinking? Kenton was Steven's sister. They were

very close. And they were my friends.

But the wheels in my brain kept spinning.

If Steven had killed Kenton, and was trying to frame me for it, suddenly everything fell into place. I'd told him where I was going, and with his wings he could get to my house and back in minutes. Flown to my house, and stolen a knife. He could have murdered Kenton anywhere. Then placed her back on the cliff top, parked the plane outside the Motorize manor to match my movements, then taken it to the cliff top and tied it to her, flying it high to explain how he'd come to find her first. Finally, he called the police.

Once he got home again he would find out I had vanished into thin air without ever leaving the Motorize manor. Despite carefully murdering Kenton at a time I'd have trouble establishing an alibi, he played the tragic role of a brother with a dead sister, coming to visit me in jail six days after I'd been put there, ten days after her death, not because he was grieving, but because he had to wait for his back to heal and the wings to fall off. **I believe you. You would never kill Kenton.** Had he been lying to my face?

No way. I actually shook my head, even though Penelope was looking at me. I couldn't tell her about this yet.

Steven would never do a thing like that. I kept repeating that until I remembered something else.

I know someone else with a sad power like hers.

When Darlington said that to me, was it a hint?

A sad power?

That made sense, I thought. That's why Ben Motorize was so hell bent on sticking the crime on me. He was protecting his son. Or at least protecting the reputation of his family name. The reason he'd let a son of noble birth go work in France was because he wanted to get him away from all this till it settled down. This also explained why the last two years had managed to make Darlington so intimidating and formidable.

That was the formidability of a girl suddenly thrust into the

center of her family affairs, and the honed intensity of someone who'd been grappling with her family's secret all this time.

Ohhh, Steven Motorize! Was it true? What happened!? Why would you ever kill Kenton? You were so close! Until I met them, they'd flown planes together, laughing and happy!

I looked up at the sky, and remembered.

The kids I spoke to were a little surprised about one thing. The school was asking about her plans for the future, and she'd said she was hoping to get a job after school ended. Like, she's got a title, why would she need a *job*?"

That was it. Kenton's father would never have allowed her to do that. She wanted freedom, would have done anything to get away from him. But leaving her father meant leaving home. And that meant leaving Steven. That was motive enough for murder. But, I thought...

What need was there to frame me for the murder? Did he have reason to resent me!? I don't get it! I just don't get it!

I took a few unsteady steps towards the edge of the cliff, and Penelope threw her arms around me. "Careful!"

Three steps further and I'd have fallen. And Steven wasn't here to catch me any more.

"That reminds me," Penelope said. "Harriet Motorize, their mother, threw herself off these very cliffs."

"Steven would never have let Kenton go. But Kenton said it was better to die than to be trapped in a cage her whole life. She threw herself off there to torture Steven," Darlington said.

Three days after my first visit to the cliffs in three years, neither Darlington nor I mentioned plea bargains.

"I wasn't there myself, but I know what happened. Steven first grew those wings the day he couldn't save our mother. Kenton

knew that as well as I did. And she told him she'd throw herself off those cliffs over and over until she died, too. Steven couldn't stand it. Not the sadness of seeing her try to kill herself over and over again. The pain of having his wings rip out of his back every time she did. You've seen them, right, Jorge? Steven's wings. Those huge, painful looking wounds. The pain he felt every time they came out must have been unimaginable. But Steven always smiled and acted like it was nothing. But it wasn't nothing. Wings made of flesh and bone tearing their way out of his back. Kenton knew just how much they hurt, but she kept pushing him until he exploded. All the anger he'd bottled up over the years. He realized that she knew how he suffered, and kept placing herself in danger, taking advantage of him, doing whatever she liked, torturing him. Both of them taking their stress out on each other. Kenton was angry all the time. Steven was bottling up his pain, pretending not to be angry. They could never have kept that up forever. And they both understood each other perfectly. Kenton may have been murdered, but it might as well have been suicide. I'm sure she did throw herself off the cliff, so it began and ended as a suicide. But I think this way they're both free. Freed by the clash of their emotions."

"But you have no proof," Darlington said, placing her tea cup on its saucer.

I didn't. "And you won't testify in my favor."

"Of course not. I am Darlington Motorize. I have too much I need to protect. You're a Joestar. You understand."

Did I?

When I didn't answer Darlington smiled. "You were friends with Kenton and Steven, but you were always happier than them. You're the only heir the Joestars have. How can you be so carefree? Were you born that way?"

Hmmm.

"Or is because you were brought up in a Spanish territory?"

That might be part of it, but...

"Or because you know someone else will carry the Joestar family for you?"

That seemed closest to the mark.

We'd moved Jonathan Joestar from La Palma Island to the basement here in England. He wasn't dead, and that might be part of what I felt the way I did. Like someday it would be his day again, and I was just a temporary replacement.

This was the first time I'd ever consciously thought that.

"If you're going to keep trying to frame me, I'll go find Steven, and make him confess," I said. "Tell your father that. I may not be able to leave the country, but I can do that much."

Darlington looked me right in the eye. "You've got more spine than I thought."

Yeah. I wasn't just the crap son of the Joestars. I was the boy driver gunning for the second rank seat in the RAC.

"I'll tell him," Darlington said, "But there's a lot of people in on this now, and it won't be that easy to stop. The hardest thing for people to do is to know how to lower a fist once they've raised it."

I didn't care how long it took. If we were doing planes next I had a lot to do, and a lot to learn.

As I left the Motorize manor for the first time in two years, for the second time ever, I thanked Faraday for the tea. I have no idea what he thought of me, or just how much he knew, but he fixed me with a gentle expression that stopped just short of being a smile and said, "I believe it will rain this evening, so do hurry home, Master Joestar."

That reminded me. "Um, two years ago, that boy who came asking for me...did you happen to look at his feet?"

He was silent for a moment, then said, "...no. To tell the

truth, I have done my best not to think about that visitor."

"? Why?"

"I found him quite sinister."

"...I guess I can see that, but..."

"What did he look like to you, Master Joestar?"

"Eh? He was my friend, a Japanese kid. Nothing unusual."
Other than the fact that he was floating.

"I see..." Faraday said. "To me he appeared to be a Spaniard.
A terrifying Spaniard with no eyes."

"Hmm? He had eyes...wait, a Spaniard? Not a Japanese kid
who spoke Spanish?"

"Yes. He wore his hat low, hiding his face, but there were
dark pits where his eyes should be. His skin was browned, like any
Spanish child. He was maybe twelve or thirteen. I have never seen
anyone Japanese, but he was decidedly not Asian. Thinking back on
it now I believe that was something evil in the shape of a child.
When I heard you vanished and were discovered underground in
Rome, I knew that devil had done something to you, and it made
absolute sense to me. I have never spoken to anyone about this. I've
been too terrified. Much too terrified."

What was he talking about? He was getting up there, but
hardly seemed senile. What could he have seen that rainy evening?

A year later, I was cleared of all suspicion in Kenton's
murder, and joined the Royal Aero Club with head held high. The
year after that John was the first Englishman to officially fly a
plane on the Island of Sheppey, and a year after that, in 1910,
Charles Rolls died in an airplane crash and John never again flew a
plane, but there were plenty of us still flying, so I kept flying too.

And an ill wind began to blow.

You're a fool, Jorge. The next war's gonna be way bigger

than any before, in fields, soldiers, and weapons.

Like John Moore-Brazabon had said, the Great War came, and with it...came other evils.

Chapter 10
The H.G. Wells
H.G.ウェルズ

Capt. Funnier Valentine spoke into his headset. "Houston, we have a problem." Just like in the movies! In no time, Narancia and I were caught, our arms fastened tightly to a bed. Narancia was so confused he didn't think to use his Stand. We'd appeared out of nowhere a moment after they discovered the moon, and while the rest of the crew were still reeling, one man calmly began to question us.

"My name is Enrico Pucci. May I ask your names?"

Narancia didn't appear to speak English, so I answered, telling him my name and address. This made Pucci's eyes widen momentarily.

"? What?"

"...nothing," he said. Clearly there was something.

Hey! I am your instrument. Someone needs you. I'll take you to him. That's what Tsukumojuke had said. Who was it who needed me?

What did he mean, he was my instrument? He seemed as if he knew everything, understood everything, but threw me off the deep end without even attempting to explain.

Without even explaining how he came to be still alive.

...was it even possible that he wasn't dead? I couldn't believe that he'd been faking his death. I'd seen a photograph of Tsukumojuke, his head hanging back, cut through the neck until it was barely attached to his body. Was there any chance that photo had been a mistake, a trap, or a fake?

I couldn't tell from here. I stared at the pebble phone on the floor. None of the astronauts had realized it was a phone. I wondered if it would still get a signal. Stand powers could ignore the laws of physics. It would probably work just fine. If it would connect to Morioh, then I could ask someone to look into things for me.

"...and your companion's name?" Pucci asked, bringing me

back to the present. All I knew about Narancia was his name and he seemed disinclined to speak.

So I said, "He's a wise guy."

'Mafia' was Italian, and it seemed likely Narancia would know the word 'gangster' as well, so I did my best to allude to the truth in English. Pucci glanced down at the knife he'd taken off Narancia. There was a crest emblazoned on it. The mark of the Passione Family. Pucci asked nothing further about Narancia's identity, moving on to other questions, but I didn't know how we'd come here, so I couldn't begin to answer them. When I said we'd come from Morioh and Nero Nero Island, the other crew members exchanged glances. "Morioh!? Nero Nero Island!? Seriously!? Is this part of the land sailing phenomenon?" someone said. Was that what they were calling it?

"Very well...for the moment, you'll have to stay put. For your own safety," Pucci said, and went back to the others. I tried to remember anything I'd read about Pucci in the news. Enrico Pucci's path to being an astronaut was an unusual one; he'd started out in Seminary School, and had served as the priest at a prison before making an dramatic career change that had been the talk of the country at the time. When he told a reporter he was searching for a way to get to Heaven, it caused quite a stir.

"Hey, dickhead! What the fuck is going? What did your Stand do to us?" Narancia snarled, kicking my leg repeatedly. I ignored him.

The astronauts on this spaceship were all scientists, and they'd begun talking to Houston about our sudden appearance, the discovery of the third moon, and any connection there might be to the two mysteriously moving land masses back on Earth. I kept one ear on their conversation, stared at the view out the window, and thought.

From the window I could see the third moon, hidden on the

dark side of Mars. From a different angle than the astronauts. But the existence of this extra moon must have something to do with me being here. The timing of our arrival also had meaning.

The satellite floating outside the window was very small. And round. An almost perfect sphere. Nothing like the other two moons – Phobos, which did two orbits of Mars a day at a height of 6000 kilometers, and the even smaller Deimos, which did four orbits at the height of 2300 kilometers, were both misshapen lumps of ice and rock. This third moon was unusual both as a satellite and as a celestial body.

For one thing, it had no craters. No dents or bulges. It was smooth like a mirror. But it did not appear to be made of gas or liquid. The astronauts had already determined that much in their analysis; from the infrared properties of the moon's surface it was clearly made of rock. Had it been carved out back when Mars still had water? I wondered, but that was impossible. There were no rivers that could tumble a rock five kilometers in diameter. Not on Mars, which had half the diameter of Earth, and one third the gravity. What explained the lack of craters? Was it possible it had simply not been hit by any asteroids since the universe began? But how could a sphere like this be created in the first place?

Even more mysterious was the moon's distance from Mars. From my eavesdropping on the astronauts' discussion, it was only eight kilometers above the surface. Since the atmosphere of Mars was ten kilometers, that meant it was inside the atmosphere. It should have either been flung away, or crashed back into the surface of Mars, but it was staying put. Physics be damned.

Just as I concluded that this moon was definitely the reason I'd been brought here

Kohhhhhhhhhhh.....

A sound like a dull chime echoed inside of me and for a moment I got excited thinking it was caused by getting something right like the light bulb over a character's head in comics. Did that shit happen for real? But of course it didn't. It wasn't all in my head, either. It wasn't in my head at all! It was in my belly, somewhere in my internal organs, a real sound so deep I could feel the reverb spreading through my body.

What!?! I snapped my head around and looked at Narancia. He was glaring back at me. "Whaaat? You aren't a Stand Master...? Or is it already out?"

He was using his Stand on me...inside me. "Stop it. I don't have a Stand."

"What? Fucking liar..." he glared at me a second longer, then broke his gaze. "Whatever. If you don't wanna die, don't move your head to the left. Got it?" Inside me there was a psst followed by a shuuuuuuuuunnnn as something went rocketing forward filling my blood and flesh with bubbles. Shit! What had he done? It went past the back of my belly button, up past my heart, headed for my shoulder. Wherever it went something spread through my lungs and heart like a wake, shaking them. Making waves inside me. This could only be...a missile. No, it had a propeller...it was a torpedo! The tip of it reached the skin of my left shoulder.

Bam! It burst through the skin and shirt. Blood splattered on my left cheek. Tremendous pain followed a moment later.

If you don't wanna die, don't move your head to the left.

If I had moved my head, would this torpedo have passed through my neck and made my head explode!? "Arghhhhhh!" I screamed, covered in blood. The astronauts came running...or didn't. They took a step towards me, and then stopped, staring at us suspiciously.

"Fuckers!" Narancia yelled. "Why don't you come check on his wound!? Don't you feel sorry for him!?"

Valentine, Pucci, and the other crew members, Pocoloco Triple-Seven and Goyathlay Soundman, were both just staring at Narancia, no matter how much he shouted. This wasn't right, I thought. I wasn't sure what was passing between them, but it seems Narancia and these four men were beginning to understand each other. And whatever that understanding was was a healthy understanding.

"You motherfuckers can see it, right?" Narancia yelled. "You're all Stand Masters!? I don't care if you are or not! Die!"

Pssht pssht pssht pssht four shots in a row echoed through my stomach, and shhhaaa they rushed across my back and pop pop papop long missiles burst out of my side and ka-chunk tiny wings snapped into place in the air and they headed for the four astronauts. They were clearly cruise missiles, and there was an attack submarine inside my body that had fired them. This was Narancia's Stand.

"What are you doing!? This ship's too small!" I yelled, but Narancia didn't give a shit. "Shaddap, first blow wins!" he snarled and I rolled myself into a ball a moment before the missiles hit the four astronauts. I braced for impact, and took a tight hold of the bed in case the hull breached, as I did not want to be sucked out into space. I was already tied to it with a zip tie, but that was much too thin to support my entire body, although it might just cut through my wrist. I heard four muffled explosions and something hit the wall.

I looked up, and saw a sand monster standing in front of the astronauts, all the sand swirling as it swallowed up the smoke. It was a Stand. Narancia was right.

"Shit!" Another missile was fired inside of me, passing through me and out my back, and hitting me in the wrist. Boom!

And then aaaugh my hand was blown clean off! I thought but a moment later I noticed I could still feel my hand holding onto the edge of the bed. The missile didn't shoot my hand off, it shot the zip tie off. Now my hands were free! I turned to tell Narancia, but before I could he shouted, "Wake the fuck up!" and punched me. Crack! I felt my upper left canine break, and even though the punch left me quite woozy I clearly caught a glimpse of a white tooth and a spurt of blood flying out of my mouth. And something hiding behind the tooth.

A submarine. Surfaced.

Just as the tooth was about to reach the famous Native American astronaut Soundman, it was knocked back by the sand monster, and rolled sadly away into a corner. My poor tooth.

"A submarine that can dive into the bodies of living things," Soundman said, glaring at Narancia. "But it could not escape my eyes."

Narancia grinned back at him. "Heh, submarines were made for hiding. So why do you think I left is surfaced?"

Drops of blood landed on Soundman's face. My blood, from when the tooth was knocked out. Narancia's submarine surfaced briefly on top of the blood splatter, as if to mock Soundman, and then it began rocketing forward. I finally got it. Like Soundman said, this Stand could move freely through the human body, including human blood and teeth, and almost certainly through skin and other bodily fluids as well. And if the host body touched another, it could transfer to the new one. Narancia had injured me, hoping they'd come to treat my wounds, and in the process come in contact with me. "Nothing easier than tricking people who think they've got good eyes! My Das Boot is a fleet! Dive! Dive! Diiiiive!" Narancia shouted. Then a strange sort of gun emerged from his open mouth. The hand holding it was clearly not human. This inhuman hand pressed the gun's barrel to Narancia's forehead,

and Funnier Valentine said, "Hold your fire. I can kill you before your missiles explode."

"Mm...mmph!" With Funnier's Stand's arm sticking out of his mouth, whatever Narancia shouted was unintelligible. The hand vanished, and a second later a torpedo shot into his open mouth, hit the back of his front teeth, and exploded. Everything below Narancia's nose was blown clean off.

Narancia had a submarine inside his own body, too. When the hand dodged his attack he'd ended up injuring himself with his own Stand, but despite the scope of his injuries, Narancia was still conscious. "Auuuuughh, 'otherhucker!" he roared, and the submarine in Soundman began poppoppoppop firing a hail of missiles that Soundman's Stand, the sand monster, wrapped itself around, containing the explosions in the swirling sand. Thud thud thud thud.

"Hucker! Ea' thith!" Narancia howled, and I guess he started attacking Soundman from the inside, because there was a series of muffled splats, and the back of Soundman's NASA suit exploded, but the hand that had come out of Narancia's mouth appeared again, emerging out of the top bunk of the bunk bed, a humanoid Stand with eyes like camera lenses. It pointed the weird looking gun at the back of Narancia's head and didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. Bang bang bang bang bang...! But Narancia's head wasn't blown off and what wounds he sustained were skin deep because the bullets Funnier's Stand fired were all exploding just before they reached his head. A series of bright fireworks went off between the gun barrel and his head, and I saw the bullets themselves bouncing off the wall nearby. Each time the gun fired, submarines floating just inside the surface of Narancia's skin fired missiles deflecting the bullet trajectory. It was an incredible sight, but in such close quarters, in a spaceship filled with delicate equipment, firing a hail of bullets and missiles (albeit small ones)

was hardly the best idea.

"Do you wanna die here, Narancia?" I shouted. "Even if you survive this fight, how will we get back to Earth!?" He was still young. Still looked like a boy. Maybe I could work that to my advantage. "You'll never see your friends again!"

Narancia hesitated for a moment; like any young gangster his compatriots were the only thing keeping him from being alone in the world, but, "Sharrup...they ain takin' 'e here! I'd shane the Hassione nane! Ain hut 'hamily' neans!" he shouted like a well-trained soldier, the dark fires of a trained killer igniting in his eyes again.

Shit, I thought, but then I saw him start to sweat, beads of it running down his face, not just his face but every inch of him, great drops of liquid that weren't colorless at all but green and purple all mixed together and when I looked back up at his eyes the gleam was gone and they were hollow and unfocused. Why!?

Narancia suddenly burst into tears, laughing. "Heh heh heh, ya huckin' done it now...I gonna die here...don't horget 'e, Huccellati, Ahhacchio, Hista, Giorno..." His face was a mess, and the drops falling off him weren't sweat but melting flesh, and clearly Narancia's entire body was rapidly rotting away. I turned around, and the astronauts had stopped attacking.

Behind Enrico Pucci was a humanoid Stand, with a crown-shaped mask, every inch of it's body covered in letters signifying the DNA base sequence. Everyone but him had gone back to their duties as if the battle were over. Even Soundman looked fine, but I thought his back exploded? What happened? Pucci caught my puzzled look, and said, "Mr. Soundman's body is...almost entirely composed of sand. Since he was a child...his people are native to the desert. As he explained it, one day his body suddenly understood sand, and sand him, and he and the sand absorbed each other. Things like this happen to humans sometimes. When

people fully accept the land they live in they become one with that land. There are not enough examples for it to have a name, but Mr. Soundman and I call it 'Bound'. People has always adapted to their environment. People in the Savannah learn to see far across the grasslands, and webs grow between the fingers of professional swimmers...even without such physical transformations, we all grow accustomed to our surroundings, learn to fit in, but this is far beyond that. Those who are Bound completely merge with their environment, or become the environment itself. They don't adapt to it, they are it. And Mr. Soundman is lucky to be Bound. ...you are not a Stand Master, are you? Jorge Joestar."

When he said my name, I jumped. Somehow, I'd fallen asleep. I looked up and Pucci stepped over to Narancia, reached out his hand, and pulled two discs out of Narancia's head. Narancia had no expression, and was muttering under his breath, his face and body rotting, festering, bits of him ready to fall off at any moment. Pucci had done something to me too; I didn't remember wearing a hat, but sticking out of my forehead was a visor, round, and flat; some precious part of me given shape by Pucci's Stand. I couldn't let him take it, I thought, but I couldn't move a muscle. I could feel my arms and legs, but they were not mine to command.

Pucci took the disc from my head, and ran his fingers across it. "Only one disc...you really aren't a Stand Master. Ohhh? You're adopted. And adopted by the Joestar heir."

!?! I could hear what he said, but couldn't understand. I couldn't think at all.

Pucci put the disc back in my head, and it slid smoothly back inside, vanishing without a trace. My mind returned with it.

"Do you know how to get to Heaven?" Pucci asked.

Pucci had done something to me...I assumed he had given me enough control of my body back that I'd be able to answer his question. I tried to speak, and found that I could, barely. "Isn't...

that what you're supposed to tell me, Father?" I whispered.

Pucci's eyes gleamed. "It is. You're a good detective. You always find the right answer. But not where it concerns the one who brought you here. The one who vanished soon after. You don't understand what Tsukumojuku Kato said. Yet."

Hey! I am your instrument. Someone needs you. I'll take you to him.

He'd read my memories. By pulling that disc out of me. Watching my surprise, Pucci smiled, as if having a very good day. "Detectives are a wonderful thing. Everything has meaning, hunh?"

"There's a important, inflexible law that defines the world."

".....?"

"Everything has meaning. Nothing is out of place."

"God is everywhere," Pucci said. "God is the word. The word has meaning. Thus, everything in this world has meaning. I see! You coming here, too, has meaning. And you were brought here because someone here has need of you. Who could that be?"

Behind him, Pocoloco Triple-Seven said, "Hey...there's... there's someone else coming. He's gonna destroy the H.G. Wells."

"What!?" Funnier shouted. "Who!?"

"I dunno!"

"Look," Soundman said, staring out the window at Mars. "My sand's been caught by something."

I could see it out the window near me, too. Part of the sand Soundman had sent swirling into space was still floating there, but it turning randomly, the shape of it shifting and morphing.

"You aren't doing this?" Funnier asked. The same question I had.

Soundman shook his head. "It's not me. And not the rotting Italian kid."

Narancia's entire body was rotted through, and he looked ready to crumble at any moment.

I could tell at a glance why he'd mentioned Narancia. The prow of his Das Boot could be seen inside the swirling vortex of sand. Soundman must have ejected the Stand inside him along with this sand...but out in the vacuum of space the sand was moving as if there were forces acting on it that could not possible exist, and as it swirled, it was falling towards Mars, moving faster and faster. As we followed it's path, the astronauts and me all saw the same thing. "Hey..." "What the...?" "What are we seeing?"

What were we seeing was a black string wrapped around the mass of sand, pulling it...towards the tiny new moon, floating closer to the surface of Mars.

Something string-like extended from the surface of this moon out into space, and it had captured the mass of sand. Was there something on the moon's surface?

"Houston, are you seeing this?" Funnier asked.

The answer came over the loudspeakers. "Yes. We can't believe our eyes. We're trying to analyze it, but is...someone fishing from the surface of the moon? That's the only thing we can imagine, but..."

"Soundman, you've lost all control of that sand?" Pocoloco asked.

The Native American astronaut shook his head. "It's too far away. It's gone back to being normal sand."

Pocoloco turned to Pucci. "Yo, wake the Italian dipshit up and see if he can move his sub."

"Sure thing," Pucci said, and slid the disc he'd stolen from Narancia back into his melting head...and submarines appeared on the surface of my skin, and Pucci's, and the other astronauts, as if waiting for their master to reboot.

"One, two, three...daaaamn, he's got a whole fleet of these things," Pocoloco said. "What hell has he been through to control a Stand like this at his age?"

"He may only be sixteen, but he was abused by his father, betrayed by his friends, sent to juvie, bullied...then he became homeless and was preyed upon by street gangs. The twenty-three people he's killed since joining the mafia were all low-life scum. No sins worth calling a sin," Pucci said. He put the other disc back in Narancia, and spoke to him in Italian. "God has forgiven your sins. You will no longer act against me."

Narancia went from looking like cheesecake left outside for ten days to his old self – even the damage he'd done to his mouth was repaired somehow. Light came back to his eyes, and he looked very surprised. "Ehhh...! Hunh? I thought I killed all of you..." Had he been shown an illusion?

"Why would you try to kill us?" Pucci said. "There is no need. We are your friends, and if you do as we say, we won't have to throw you off this space ship."

That clearly didn't entirely sit well with Narancia, but he didn't quite manage to argue it further, which terrified the shit out of me. Jesus. Stands could control the human mind and emotions to this degree? And I knew for sure that Enrico Pucci was evil.

If he had a good heart, he would never dream of tinkering with the hearts of man like this. He would not lie to them. 'Good' is evident in deeds; 'good' tries to influence feelings and motives through appeals to logic and critical thought. If that deed leads to

a good result, it is good; if the intent, too, was good, perfect. The opposite was not good; if the deeds cause harm, they were evil; even if the intent was good, the extenuating circumstances render the intent moot, and if the intent was bad punishment should be meted out without hesitation. There are many shallow fools who put too much stock in good intentions, and the man before me was one of them. This man was so sure of his own good intent he paid no heed to the evil he wrought at every turn.

"Narancia, your ship out there...can you move it?" Pucci said, pointing out the window at the mass of sand and the Das Boot being pulled toward the third moon. They were quite small and far away now.

"...it's not too far to move, but I can't move it. That sand isn't a Stand any more, is it?"

"Strictly speaking, my Dune is almost certainly not a Stand, but..." Soundman said, nodding. "Once it gets far enough from my body, it becomes ordinary sand again."

"My Das Boot can only move inside living things or other Stands. But I can still fire missiles! Should I blow this space ship up?"

"Don't," Pucci said, but Narancia was grinning.

"Heh heh. Then maybe I should blow that round thing up," he said, glancing at the third moon.

Pucci followed his gaze. "...better not. I believe it has great meaning."

"Fuck that," Narancia said, goofing off. Pucci slapped him, and the disc popped out of his head again.

Pucci ran his fingers across it again. "I despise boys who can't mind their manners," he said, and put it back. Life returned to Narancia's face again.

"Ah, that was my bad, Father Pucci," he said, bowing his head. "I promise I ain't gonna be that dumb again."

"Lack of education decides your limits," Pucci sighed.

Narancia's expression changed completely. "You trying to fucking say I'm stupid!?" he snarled, and whipped out a knife he'd kept hidden through all this turmoil.

Pucci looked surprised. "How...?"

The human unconscious is beyond the reach of man.

Pucci dodged Narancia's knife a few moments, got the disc out again, and had just made him throw the knife away when, "H.G. Wells, prepare for attack!" came over the speakers.

Thud!

A massive impact shook the ship, and we were all flung hard into the nearest wall, or to the floor.

"Whaat!?" Pocoloco shouted.

"This is Houston," the speaker said. "H. G. Wells, are you safe?"

"What was that?" Funnier demanded. "A break-down?"

"We took control over the ship remotely. Emergency measures required the reverse thrusters fire for another five second, then you'll go quiet and pull away from Mars."

"What!? Is the mission canceled!?"

"No, simply a temporary measure. Once you're at a safe distance we intend to look for an angle to return...but first you need to see something!"

Houston was clearly struggling to keep the panic out of their voice.

"H. G. Wells, we found something positively unreal when we examined that image. First, the string towing the sand. Have a look at this."

Everyone pulled themselves together, and looked at the largest monitor in the living quarters. The image on screen was a 3D image showing the thread from the moon branching into countless other threads, all stretched upwards. It looked like a

plant, or a bacteria, but instead of a root they all led back to that sphere. The sphere was so small and the length of the threads stretching in all directions so great that we didn't recognize it at first.

"The little ball in the middle is the third moon...!" The speakers explained, as we all stood stunned. "A great quantity of...tentacles are reaching up from the surface of the moon. We fired the reverse thrusters before those 'arms' could grab this ship. If you had continued on course, you'd already be in a forest of those tentacles. It remains to be seen if they can snare you like they did that mass of sand."

The entire crew was thinking furiously, saying nothing.

"And that's not the end of it," the speaker continued. "The next shot is from the ultra high resolution images you sent. What it shows...we can't believe this is really happening."

It showed a man with long hair. He was half-naked, wearing only a loin-cloth, and there were horns on his head, a terrifying grin on his face. He was looking right at the camera, his eyes clearly focused directly on it.

"The fuck...!?" Funnier whispered. I'm sure they heard him.

The man in Houston somehow managed to scream without raising his voice.

"Do you see the string in his right hand?" I glanced at the moment. There was a rope of some kind leading from his wrist towards the screen. "That rope connects to the third moon. He's running with a five kilometer moon trailing eight kilometers above the surface of Mars like a balloon! With a single rope, he's kept the third moon trapped on the back of Mars! He's hidden the moon on the back of Mars all this time by running with it!"

At the equator, the diameter of Mars was 6794.4 km. That

mean the circumference was 21,334.4 km. A day on Mars was 24.62 hours, so at most he would have to be running at 866.54 kph across the surface of Mars. 240.7 meters a second. Three quarters of the speed of sound. That figure was assuming he ran constantly, without sleeping or resting. The gravity was only a third that of Earth, but even so, was it humanly possible to run that fast?

"He appears to be standing still right now...?" Funnier said.

"Yes..." Houston replied. "That's what's so frightening. This creature can run even faster..."

"Hey, Soundman's sand reached the moon!" Pocoloco said, looking out the window.

Narancia had been watching all this absently, but suddenly he frowned. "Mm? My Das Boot's moving again. Hunh? That's weird...it's on the surface of the moon..." A headset periscope appeared over Narancia's right eye, and he peered through it. "Hmm...I don't know much about these things, but are moons alive?"

What was he talking about? While I stared at Narancia, confused, Pocoloco screamed. "Auuuughhh!"

We all looked through the window, and saw what he'd seen. In the distance, we could see the tiny moon hovering...and could see that it had turned to face us.

The moon was a giant eyeball, and the lid had just opened.

It looked exactly like Odilon Redon's *The eye like a strange balloon goes to infinity* or Mizuki Shigeru's faux American yokai, Backbeard.

Just as I was about to belatedly scream myself,
Ka-thunk!

Another huge impact rocked the ship, without any warning.
"Auuuughhh!"

Rolling the floor, I realized this lurch was in the opposite direction from the first, which meant...?

The floor seemed to heave upwards, the whole ship tilting. The reverse thrusters must still be firing. I looked out the window and saw black threads wrapped around the H. G. Wells. They'd caught us.

"Gaaaaawwd fuuuuuuuckin' daaaamn it!"

Dust spray rose from the third moon; it looked like Narnacia was attacking it with Das Boot. Dozens of submarines were riding the threads wrapped around the H. G. Wells. All fired cruise missiles at the third moon! Boom boom boom boom boom boom boom! Hundreds of missiles all rocketing forward in unison, raining down on the giant eye moon's face...and then the face opened its mouth. A crescent moon slit right below the eyeball that split the moon from end to end, revealing rows of jagged teeth. The maw gaped open until it was the entire visible surface of the moon. The moon had a thin surface layer but the inside was hollow. It was a five kilometer balloon held by the horned man on Mars. A living balloon, with one giant eyeball and infinite hands that stretched all the way to outer space.

Every missile Narancia's Das Boot fleet fired was swallowed up by the moon's mouth. Only when the last one was stuffed in its cheeks did the mouth close, and it savored the flavor of the massive array of explosions within. The impacts shook the hands dragging us. Narancia stared in disbelief. "Fucking seriously? I didn't even scratch it!?"

Pucci's eyes were open wide; he seemed equally surprised and impressed. "Astonishing! I feel sure we traveled this far from Earth for just this encounter!"

"H. G. Wells, this is Houston," the man on the loudspeaker said. "The President would like a word with you."

Funnier looked grave. Pocoloco frowned. "The Funniest...?"

Without waiting for a response from us, the voice on the speaker changed. A calm, gentle voice, ever so slightly brisk.

"To all aboard the H. G. Wells, I am the President of the United States, The Funniest Valentine. Presently I am at the UN Headquarters in New York, attending an emergency meeting of the security council. We're discussing how to deal with the mysterious life form discovered behind Mars – what we are currently calling The Eyed Balloon. I am here to report our current progress."

Wrapped in the moon's tentacles, the H. G. Wells spun, shaking constantly.

The Funniest continued. "I'm sending enlarged photographs of The Eyed Balloon's interior." A still image of the moon with its mouth fully open appeared on the screen, with seven different circles inscribed on it.

"Next, enlargement of the circled portions." Seven different higher resolution shots began cycling on the screen. What had appeared smooth before now showed something odd. Part of some machine floating against the back of the moon's interior.

"...what....? Is that...a man-made satellite? No..." Pocoloco said. "That's...a probe. With those armored plates and mirrors... could it be...!?"

"Yes, Specialist Triple-Seven. This is the unmanned probe the ESA launched in 1985 to survey Halley's Comet. We've verified the COSPAR ID on the probe's surface. 1985-056A."

On one of the seven shots...there was a number written on the two machines.

.....? Two?

"No fucking way," Pocoloco muttered.

"But this is, in fact, happening," The Funniest replied. "The seven spacecraft in this pictures are all the same ship, identical in every way. Every one of the seven passed inside Halley's Comet on March 14th, 1986, photographed the core from a distance of 600

kilometers, and vanished in 1999. They are all the Giotto probe."

"Father, with the time you've spent in space, you know very well we do not launch the same ship seven times, and we never repeat the same COSPAR ID. There is no possibility that some conspiracy resulted in the launch of multiple identical ships without America's knowledge. Manufacturing and launching a probe is very expensive, and there's no way to fire a rocket without the citizens noticing, and no means to fund such a launch."

So seven Giotto probes were eaten by The Eyed Balloon in outer space? Snared by these tentacles? These tentacles had a range of around 100 kilometers, but that was nothing compared with the vastness of space. It seemed highly unlikely Giotto would have flown within range. As we all scratched our heads, Narancia kept up his futile attack. Beside him, Pucci looked as astonished as I was, but was almost rapturously muttering, "Do the fourteen words have meaning?"

The fourteen words? He seemed to be seeing and thinking something entirely different from the rest of us.

Seven Giotto probes...that the photographs found. There might be even more, but whatever truth lay behind this mystery, the H. G. Wells was about to be swallowed by The Eyed Balloon, with us on board. Just a glance outside the window and the spinning view of The Eyed Balloon's giant round face and eyelid was noticeably closer.

"And this photograph was collected from a Nazi base in Switzerland during the second World War," The Funniest said, over the speakers. I had not expected the word "Nazi" to show up here, but that surprise was dwarfed by the shock of the picture that appeared on screen. It showed the horned man, the same man currently holding The Eyed Balloon's tether down on Mars. Long,

narrow eyes, long black hair. Surrounded by Nazi soldiers, yet grinning wickedly; once again his eyes were focused right on the camera lens.

"This man's name is Cars," The Funniest said. "Much about him remains a mystery, but there are five things we know for sure. He was one of the Pillar Men discovered by Nazi scientists underground in Mexico and Italy. Of the four Pillar Men they collected, only Cars survives. It seems that Cars was somehow caught up in a volcanic eruption at Italy's Isulo Vulcano and flung out of the atmosphere. Shortly before that, Cars...how, exactly, is unknown, but he donned a stone mask fitted with the Aja Red Stone, bathed in ultraviolet light, and became the Ultimate Thing. The last thing we know is that the man who beat the other three Pillar Men, and sent the Ultimate Cars into space was an English man residing in America named Joseph Joestar."

.....what?

That was my great-grandfather's name; the grandfather of my adoptive father, Jonda Joestar.

"I believe you have a Jorge Joestar on board?" asked the American President. "Will you tell us why...and how you came to the H. G. Wells?"

Funnier and the crew all turned and stared at me. The gleam in Pucci's eyes was especially terrifying. I did my best not to look at him, and answered in English. "I was hoping you could tell me."

"...either way, this cannot be a coincidence," The Funniest said, dropping the matter. "That's everything we've discovered at present. As for the conclusion of the security council, you have ten

minutes to escape The Eyed Balloon's tentacles. Once that ten minutes is up, we will detonate the H. G. Wells remotely. There will be no rescue mission. Our top priority is preventing Ultimate Cars from returning to Earth. Are these orders understood, Captain Valentine?"

Eh? Detonate? If we didn't escape the tentacles in the next ten minutes?

Why didn't you say that first! Then I realized the deeper meaning. They already knew it was impossible. They were going to blow us up no matter what.

I checked the view outside the window. The tentacles were wrapped around and around us, and there were a lot of them. Narancia had ignored this entire conversation (since he didn't speak English) and was still attacking, but his Das Boot fleet did not appear to have done any damage to them at all. His efforts had been so utterly futile that there were tears in his eyes.

Funnier spoke to his son. "Understood, Mr. President. ...completely."

The transmission ended, and the image on the screen switched back to the photo of Cars. Funnier's eyes had been like daggers when he spoke to his son, but when he turned around he was a different man; calm, but assured, he proceeded to bark orders at his crew. "Pocoloco! Think of a way to cut the tentacles off the H. G. Wells. While you're at it, find the explosive device and expunge it from the ship! Pucci, Soundman, Narancia Ghirga and I will do whatever we can to kill this Cars, whatever he is. And you there! Detective!"

Me. "Yes?"

"It seems you were brought here for some higher purpose. You don't have a Stand, do you? Then make like a detective and

solve some mysteries. You heard that execution order? We've got... nine minutes left. Whatever reason or purpose brought you here, we're all in the same boat now. All you can do is think as hard as you can, as much as you need."

"Sir, yes, sir!" I said, and attempted a salute. I didn't intend it to be comedic. Funnier was absolutely right. I was here because I was a detective.

I had to do my job.

"Jorge Joestar," Soundman said. I turned around, and found him in his space suit, kneeling beside me. He pointed at Narancia. "He doesn't speak English, right? Can you interpret? He seems to have a number of tiny submarines, but can he combine them into one big one?"

"Arrrrrrrgghhhhhh! God fucking damn this piece of shit how the fuck can it shake off my missiles like a 38 degree lukewarm shower! Fuuuuuuuuck!" He was half-mad now. I tapped him cautiously on his shoulder. "Fuck off! Oh. What?"

I told him Soundman's suggestion, and his eyes went wide. "...I could...I neeeeeeeever even thought of that! I'm not stupid or anything but fuuuuuuck! Let's do this! Das Boot! Retreat and regroup!"

Dozens of submarines came rocketing back up The Eyed Balloon's tentacles.

Soundman stood quietly watching them a moment, then put his helmet on, and spoke to Funnier. "I'll go listen to the sands of Mars, and understand them."

Funnier nodded. "I'm sure you can befriend Mars."

Pucci appeared beside them, also in a space suit. "I'll come, too. To talk to him."

"...you have only ever cared about the way to Heaven, Enrico Pucci."

"I seem to have a higher goal, Funnier Valentine."

"In the fog of war all will be left to destiny."

"Pray worry not about my life. I will not yet die. Not here, at least."

Narancia started shouting. "Ya haaaaaa! I did it! I fucking did it! A full power Das Boot! Anyone wants to ride, get the hell on now! We're taking off!"

Outside the windows was a nearly life-size submarine. The H. G. Wells was a sphere with a diameter of about ten meters, with a pair of two meter tall cylinders on either side that housed the emergency escape system and a dock that allowed them to connect to other ships. Narancia's Das Boot was far larger than the entire thing, at least a hundred meters long. Like a building lying on its side.

"Soundman! Pucci! You have three minutes!" Funnier said. "If you don't end the fight and get back here in that time the H. G. Wells will leave without you!"

"Shouldn't you join us on this ship?" Pucci asked.

"The H. G. Wells was placed in my care. I share its fate."

"Very well."

Soundman and Pucci both headed for the airlock, and after decompression, traveled through the vacuum of outer space to the submarine. But their movements weren't the floaty movements of normal astronauts; the second the hatch opened they zipped right over, flying directly into the submarine. Stands came in handy. "Narancia, let's go," Pucci said, in Italian. I could hear his voice coming over Narancia's headset.

"Right! Full power, forward thrust! Das Boot! Gooooooooo!"

Das Boot swooped away from the H. G. Wells, spinning on the slender tentacles, headed for The Eyed Balloon at tremendous speed, already opening fire. Psssht psssht psssht psssht the cruise missiles it fired were all full- sized, too. Missile after missile scored a direct hit on The Eyed Balloon, the explosions and shockwaves

from each impact far stronger than anything before. The Eyed Balloon closed its one big eye. Was it working?

"Right, got it, Captain!" Pocoloco shouted. "The Right Stuff has found a way to escape the tentacle's web!" I looked over and found him holding his hands in front of his chest, palms facing each other forming a sort of bowl, and strange little gnomes of some kind inside. They were making tiny models of the H. G. Wells, then taking them apart, like a pit crew, analyzing the problem. "If we release all the exterior walls of the H. G. Wells from the inside, we'll be free! The tentacles are wrapped around the cylinders and the sphere from one side, so this plan should stabilize us. If we start the engines at full power the second the walls release, we'll leave the walls in the tentacles' grip, and escape like we're shedding our skin. A space ship isn't gonna catch cold going naked! Ha ha ha! Then we'll move on to removing the explosive device. The Right Stuff has already located it."

"Good," Funnier nodded. "Get to it! Keep me updated on your progress."

"I got this!" The gnomes hopped up on his shoulders, and Pocoloco dashed out of the living quarters.

Funnier watched him go, then turned back to us. "What do you make of this 'Way to Heaven' Pucci talks about?"

What the hell was he on about? Was this really the time to talk about this? The ship was going to explode in less than eight minutes. Was it not? Was he that sure Pocoloco would pull it off? Funnier Valentine seemed totally at ease, but not quite in the way a captain certain of his crew's ability would be.

He kept talking. "When Enrico Pucci was seventeen, he began sleepwalking. Two or three times a month, he'd leave the house, fast asleep, and wander quite a ways from home. His family moved to Cape Canaveral, Florida because they were worried their eldest son would be hit by a car, and thought that a place with few

residents, open landscape, and plenty of military and government officials would make it easier to locate their sleepwalking son. Cape Canaveral is home to the Kennedy Space Center and an air force base, you see. It's patrolled 24/7. But one evening he slipped out in his sleep, and awoke outside the gates to the church his father, a priest, worked at. It was five AM. Normally he'd have been found by the patrol guards, and returned to his home, still asleep, so this was the first time he'd been out all night since moving to Cape Canaveral. Pucci's father and mother had a habit of waking up at four in the morning, and checking to see if he was still in his bed, so he imagined they were worried sick, ran home barefoot, and discovered he no longer had a family to worry about him. Pucci's home had vanished, replaced by a crater seventeen meters in diameter. A direct hit by a falling meteor. But the strangest part was that nobody had noticed the meteor falling. The meteor had evaded both the Space Center and the Air Force radar. Standing alone in front of this crater, stricken with grief, Pucci found the thing that had killed his family. It was not a rock fallen from space, but a metal plate. A man-made heat shield. This," Funnier said, putting an image of a rectangular metal plate up on the screen, with two rows of letters written on it. One was painted on the side, and read "1985-056A".

Mm?

"This is the COSPAR ID of the Giotto probe," Funnier said. "In July, 1997, it did not respond to signals from NASA when it passed by the Earth, but it did send us one signal. It fell from the sky, killing Enrico Pucci's father, mother, and younger brother, leaving only him alive."

Giotto again.

But that 'again' was not only referring to the seven Giottos

inside The Eyed Balloon. The other row of letters on the metal plate, scratched there by something sharp, also said 'Giotto'. And there were more words, as well. Fourteen phrases in all. A mix of Italian and English.

"Spiral staircase"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Desolation Row"
"Fig tart"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Via Dolorosa"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Singularity"
"Giotto"
"Angel"
"Hydrangea"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Singularity"
"Secret Emperor"

Funnier smiled. "You saw how flustered Pucci was before?"

Do the fourteen words have meaning?

Pucci was a priest, not a detective, so he may have found it hard to believe. But everything has meaning.

"There's also a message on the back of the plate. This is the main one," Funnier said, changing the image on screen. Another

three rows of English words scratched into the metal.

"Have the courage to cast aside your Stand, and as your Stand withers, it will gather 36 souls, and give birth to something new."

"It will befriend he who says the fourteen words."

"The place is 28.24 degrees North, 80.36 degrees West."

I didn't know what that meant, but I had an idea.

28.24 degrees North, 80.36 degrees West.

"Mars has longitude and latitude," I explained. "Wilhelm Beer and Johann Heinrich Mädler made the first maps of Mars, and they selected a small circle as a base point for the Prime Meridian. That point is still in use today, under the name Airy-0."

And there...

"Exactly," Funnier nodded. "And on Mars, at **28.24 degrees North, 80.36 degrees West**, Cars stands, holding the tether that leads to The Eyed Balloon. Cars is there as we arrive, and we arrived as he was there."

Funnier chuckled. "Pucci said he's going to talk, sure that he alone will find the 'Way to Heaven'. Rather selfish for a servant of God, wouldn't you say? Will the staircase to Heaven really open for one so impetuous?"

I followed Funnier's gaze, and looked down at the surface

of Mars. Narancia's submarine had already landed on the surface, and Enrico Pucci had stepped out onto the ground. He was walking towards Cars.

"Tch, what the hell? He's in the way," Narancia muttered behind me. He hadn't understood a word of what Funnier and I were talking about in English. Despite his griping, his attack never let up, a never ending rain of cruise missiles turning the surface of The Eyed Balloon into a perpetual explosion. There were holes opening in the surface of the balloon, so he was clearly doing more damage than he had with the submarines separated, but the holes closed up again the moment they formed. "Arghhhhhh how is this even possible!? Fucking break, you piece of shit! Fucking fucking fucking piece of shit!" He sounded like someone raging at a video game. I glanced back at Pucci. Was Funnier right? Was there meaning to the fourteen words written on the back of Giotto's plate, what Pucci called the Way to Heaven? Was asking that question in the first place a waste of time?

As I thought I realized the view through the window had settled down, the tentacles had released their grip, and the ship had stabilized.

Pocoloco's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Right, Valentine, ready to start those engines?"

But Funnier ignored him.

Instead, he turned towards me, and put his fingers to his lips. Shhh.

Not like my voice would reach him and Funnier's headset mike wasn't even on, but...?

"Valentine! Hey! Crap, what's going on? Right Stuff, someone go see!"

Funnier ignored the panic in Pocoloco's voice, too. "By the way, Jorge Joestar, do you know how to pilot this ship?" he asked. "I don't imagine that to be the case, but I understand detectives

tend to get interested in and study up on a great many things."

? Why was he asking that? "No. I know the basic gist of spacecraft construction, but not the specifics of piloting them. The computer controls a lot of systems, but even then it requires detailed interplay between you and the engineers, right? Before and after launch? There's no way you could fly a spaceship without substantial practice and simulation."

"Correct. I'm relieved to hear it," Funnier said, and I felt something moving behind me, and turned to see Funnier's Stand moving away from me, gun in hand. The 'window' it was looking through, a weird sort of flat plane, disappeared, leaving behind only a steel ladder.

It had been behind me, pointing a gun at me.

"Your presence here seems to have some meaning," he said, with a smile that told me everything. He was up something, and was about to set that in motion. With his Stand.

He'd used his Stand three times so far. It had shown up inside Narancia's mouth, from the upper level of the bunk bed, and now from an iron ladder. When it appeared a flat area like frosted glass cut through the space around it, and the Stand appeared from inside that 'window'. It seemed like it probably required a 'frame'. He could make a window in any frame and his Stand would look out of it.

Pocoloco's voice came over the speaker again. ".....! Valentine, you motherfucker!"

Bang!

A gunshot.

No sounds followed. I turned around, and saw one of Pocoloco's gnomes standing still at the entrance to the living quarters. As I watched, it faded out, and vanished. Funnier had shot Pocoloco, and mostly likely killed him.

"Mm? Yo, what the fuck was that?" Narancia said. "That

was a fucking gunshot...who'd this asshole shoot, Joestar!?! Urp!"

The Stand's arm emerged from his mouth mid-shout, and pressed the barrel of its gun to his forehead. "It was a mistake to send all your submarines to Mars," he said, in English, knowing full well Narancia wouldn't understand him. "And you have a very foul mouth."

Bang!

Narancia fell over, blood streaming from his head, and the Stand's arm vanished from his mouth.

I looked down at Mars from the window. The Das Boot that had been resting on The Eyed Balloon's tentacles vanished, too.

".....? Narancia, what happened?" Pucci's voice came over the speaker, in Italian. "Something going on up there?"

"Narancia? He just died," Funnier replied, in English. "How's your conversation going?"

396 ".....!"

"I've been wondering this for a while, Pucci. So let me ask... Tell me the truth. Have you ever, even once, actually believed in God?"

"What....?"

"Of course you haven't. You're the most self-absorbed man I've ever met. You only became a priest because it made you feel good about yourself. You feel no love or compassion for your fellow man. I condemn you, Enrico Pucci. You are a sinner. For seeking a way to heaven for yourself alone when you should be leading others, you will be punished. This empty red planet is beautiful isn't it? Allowing you to die here is an expression of the deep, genuine compassion I have for you."

"...hmp. Being here is destiny. The will of God."

"This Way to Heaven you speak of? You know nothing. That is why you cannot talk to Cars."

"....."

"I've been negotiating with Cars for the last eleven years. Ever since I first read the message on the plate that fell on your house."

".....!/? Rear Window!/? He was peeping?" Pucci said. Funnier glanced at me when he said this, so I knew it must be the name of Funnier's Stand. Rear Window...a Stand that could make a window in any frame, and move to it. The name was a good fit.

"Peeping? How rude. I was simply checking on a suspicious unidentified falling object," Funnier said. "Heh heh heh...I was already training as an astronaut at Cape Canaveral the day it fell. Honestly, I was out on the town, and sneaking back to base. But after catching a glimpse of that plate, I never snuck out again. It was clear evidence there was an intelligent life form outside this planet. If a square plate fell, then there was a square hole somewhere. It was comparatively easy to find it. That's when I met all the Cars."

Hunh...? Plural?

"Your Way to Heaven ends here," Funnier said. "It brought you to Mars. Let that thought comfort you in your eternal slumber, Enrico Pucci."

"God's will is with me!"

"That's a delusion."

Bang!

A third gunshot rang out. And then there was silence.

I looked down at the surface of Mars, but Pucci was too far away to make out clearly. I knew he must be at the bottom of the anchor line leading from The Eyed Balloon, but...

"Now, then... Goyathlay Soundman, a quiet man despite your name. The time has come for you to break your silence." There was no answer. ".....? I know you aren't scared. What are

you doing?"

I could see it.

A long shadow on the surface of Mars, getting bigger by the second. A massive pillar of sand, stretching up towards us. Straight towards this ship. All the sands of Mars, rushing together, feeding the pillar's growth. The pillar inhaled the sands. Soundman's sands. **I'll go listen to the sands of Mars, and understand them.** He had succeeded, and the sands of Mars were part of Soundman now. In no time, the pillar had left the atmosphere, and tip was approaching the H. G. Wells.

It was only a few kilometers away.

"Ohhh, well done, Soundman." Funnier had come over to the window beside me, and was watching the pillar approach. "I take back what I said. You are a deep and sound man, as your name suggests."

Was that clear-eyed Native American about to die, too? "Stop!" I said, but saying that wasn't going to do anything. **Do you know how to pilot this ship?** He'd decided to kill all the astronauts but himself. The only way I had of stopping him was physical. I grabbed the knife from Narancia's corpse, and lunged at Funnier's throat, but he dodged, and thud! kned me hard in the gut.

"Be still, Jorge Joestar. Now I am paying my respects to Soundman's finale."

He easily took the knife away from me, and stuck it in my right shoulder. "Auuuughhh!"

Now both my shoulders were injured, and I couldn't lift either arm.

"To which...good-bye, Soundman. It was an honor to come this far with you," Funnier said. There was another gunshot.

Bang!

....silence, again..... I looked over my blood-stained shoulder at the window. The tip of the column rising from Mars to the

heavens was only a few hundred meters away. It was still getting closer.

!?

Funnier saw it too. "? Soundman? Are you still alive?" He could control his Stand remotely, but not see what it saw.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! The gun kept firing, but the tip of the pillar kept advancing. It was only a hundred meters away. Close enough now that I could see it with my naked eye; there was an empty helmet at the top of the pillar, and Funnier's camera-eyed Stand was clinging to it, firing into the sand, opening hole after hole. But Soundman's head was nowhere to be seen.

"Soundman!? Where are you!?" Funnier screamed. I stood watching helplessly as the tip of the pillar changed shape, forming a round hole and a rim. Like a docking hatch...! Soundman was inside the pillar. In less than two minutes, he had gone from the surface of Mars to the H. G. Wells; a trained astronaut could easily hold his breath in the pillar that long.

Thud! The tip of the pillar slammed into the H. G. Wells, shaking the ship.

"Good lord...come back, Rear Window!" At his call, the Stand reappeared in the doorway to the living quarters.

Clang! Thud, thud, creeeaak! The sounds of sand pounding the door, smashing it down, and then scrunch scrunch scrunch scrunch as sandy footsteps came down the call. Soundman appeared, covered head to foot in the red sands of Mars. Even his face was hidden. On guard against Funnier's Rear Window, the Native American astronaut was still holding his breath.

Funnier's face twisted in fear. "Good God... Shoot him, Rear Window!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang! Funnier's Stand unleashed a volley, but every bullet was absorbed into the sand as Soundman charged, tackling Funnier.

"Aughhh!" Funnier's scream vanished into the sand.

Shunk shunk shunk! Thud thud! Ka-thunk!

Unable to see at all, Soundman went berserk, swinging and kicking wildly, flinging hardened sand in all directions. I barely managed to evade getting hit myself, but he was smashing machine parts right and left. I figured it was up to me to tell Soundman if Funnier was dead or down for the count, so I looked around, and realized I couldn't find him anywhere. There was a door on the wall he'd been flung against, and through the window I could see the escape pod that was supposed to be on the other side of that door. It had detached from the H. G. Wells, and was drifting away.

"Soundman! Outside! Funnier Valentine's escaping in the pod!"

I could see Funnier grinning through the pod's window. Rear Window was in a hole Soundman had punched in a computer, waiting. For Soundman to stop flailing and take a breath.

"Don't show your face! Rear Window's still got his gun pointed at you!" I yelled, but too late; out of breath, Soundman let the sands part, and Rear Window's bullet struck him right between the eyes.

Bang!

Soundman's head jerked back, and the sand suit crumbled.

"Ahhhh! Soundman!"

I could hear Funnier laughing over the loudspeaker. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Good-bye, Soundman! Jorge Joestar, I do apologize, but that ship will explode in two minutes. If you really are brought here by fate or destiny, then I'm sure you'll find a way to survive that explosion!"

On my knees on the floor, my shoulders throbbing with pain, I couldn't summon the energy to stand. I just vacantly watched his escape pod drift slowly away, not even noticing the

submarine that had appeared behind him on The Eyed Balloon.

"Tch, astronauts suck ass at murder. They don't even know the basics! Double tap, motherfucker! One shot ain't enough. Always gotta hit them again to be sure. Every fucking gangster knows that shit."

I turned to find Naranacia behind me, a small submarine sitting in the hole the bullet left in his forehead. The bullet was caught in the side of the ship. He'd left one ship from his Stand inside his body.

"Heh. Takes too long for Das Boot to get back to me if I send it away, so Buccellati and Giorno are always yelling at me to leave one or two inside me," Naranacia grinned. Funnier noticed him, and I could see him looking through the tiny window in the pod, surprised...and oblivious to the cruise missile coming up behind him. It hit the pod head on.

Boooooooooooooom! I couldn't actually hear the sound, but the escape pod exploded with Funnier on it, scattering debris all around. Rear Window faded out, and vanished.

"Ha! Suck on that!" Naranacia yelled, pointing his middle finger at the remains of the pod outside. Then he turned to me. "Don't just fucking stand there, we're getting outta here pronto."

"Eh? But how?"

"Let's start by hopping on my sub and going down to Mars."

"But don't we need to depressurize?"

"What does that even mean? It'll be fine!"

"Eh? It really won't."

"I said it will, it will. Think positive, motherfucker!"

".....!?" While we were talking the giant submarine had come up with tentacles from The Eyed Balloon and rammed into the side of the H. G. Wells.

Claaaaaaaaang! The deafening crunch was accompanied by a violent impact that shook the entire ship, followed by the whoosh of air rushing out. There was a hole in the front of the sub, too. "Ffuck yeah! Get the fuck in there!" Narancia yelled, diving headlong across the rubble, riding the rush of air, essentially letting the submarine inhale him.

"Auughhh here goes nothing!" I shouted, and threw myself after him, aiming for the hole, but my shoulders hurt and I lost my balance; I slipped right past the hole, heading for the gap in the side of the H. G. Wells. There was nothing out there! Just outer fucking space! "Auuuuuuuughhh!" I screamed and the submarine's engines fired. It passed me, placed its hole just outside the gap in the H. G. Wells, and caught me after only a moment of suitless space walk.

"Holy fuck, dude! You're really shit at this," Narancia said, laughing. I couldn't argue with that.

"On your feet! We gotta get in back." Narancia said, helping me up, and giving me his shoulder for support. We ran against the air rushing out the gap in the hull, down a narrow hall towards the tail of the submarine. "Ha ha ha! I've never been inside my Stand before! It's pretty real looking!"

Indeed there were instruments and pipes and everything a real submarine would have inside it. We ran the entire length of Das Boot, went through a tiny hatch, and Narancia closed the door behind us, locking the door with a round wheel. "OK! Do a U-Turn and get us out of here!"

The submarine groaned, and started moving. I could hear gas rushing through the pipes. Narancia had lowered his headset periscope over his right eye, and was piloting Das Boot, running it down the tentacles to The Eyed Balloon, around the surface of the moon, and then down the tether rope. Inside Mars' atmosphere, the planet's gravity took hold, and we were forced to hang off the

pipes crossing the long hallway, now a vertical shaft, as the submarine descended straight down. Narancia held on with both arms, but I was forced to hang on with my legs.

Peering through the periscope, Narancia asked, "So...what are we gonna do about this half-naked long-haired dude?"

Cars. The Ultimate Thing. What should we do?

"It'll be useless, but I could shoot him again?" Narancia suggested, half-joking. "Nah," I said. "You've attacked him plenty, and like you said, it was useless. And he hasn't done anything to us yet." But what *should* we do?

Try to talk to him? Pucci had tried...and that got him exactly nowhere, apparently.

"Right, when we're three meters off the ground, stop!"

There was a horrible screeching, and we stopped.

We were inside the atmosphere and near the surface of Mars, but we had no space suits, the air outside was less than 1% the atmospheric pressure of earth, and was 95% carbon dioxide. We wouldn't be able to breathe at all. But we couldn't stay in Das Boot forever; we had a limited amount of breathable air on board. We were between a rock and a hard place. But we were still alive.

"Ah, the space ship blew up," Narancia said, showing me the view through his headset. There were massive fireworks in the skies of Mars.

There was also a moon with an eye rising in the sky. The eye met my gaze. "Creeeepy," I said. As I handed the headset back to Narancia we heard creaking outside the hatch. Someone was coming up the vertical hall. There was still a big hole in the front of the sub, and outside that hole was...

"Uh, the half-naked dude's gone," Narancia said.

Cars had invaded Das Boot. That meant he must be able to see Stands.

The ultimate life form was getting closer. My body went

rigid, but Narancia yelled down at the hatch below us, "Hey! I dunno what the fuck you are, but don't smash my sub! This room's the only place with air left! I'm sorry about attacking you earlier! Seriously, like, super duper sorry, like legit sorry."

...it was clear he'd never been taught how to apologize to anyone.

He may be only sixteen, but he was abused by his father, betrayed by his friends, sent to juvie, bullied...

There was a groan outside, like metal bending, then a scuttling sound as something moved through the pipes, getting closer, into the room we were in...here.

Narancia and I gulped in unison, and the pipe in front of us popped open, and flesh spilled out, and the flesh took form, becoming a tall, long-haired, half-naked man.

Cars.

He could shape-shift? He turned and twisted the pipe like a twist tie, cutting off the hiss of escaping air. He looked around the interior of Das Boot as if he couldn't see us, and then took a deep breath.

In.

And out.

"Earth air," he said, in Italian. "You have no idea how much I've missed it." He smiled. "It's time to go home."

Home?

"Where?" Narancia asked, but Cars ignored him.

"This air...with three of us, it should last four hours."

"Hey! Don't fucking ignore me, Fabio!" Narancia snarled. This boy knew no fear. I poked him.

"Dude, back to Earth, obviously!" "Hunh? He's not, like, a Martian?" "He's speaking an Earth language, right? He must have been there, originally." "Oh, I see. But how's he getting back home? The space ship blew up." True, but then I remembered.

"He's got a ship."

At least seven of them. The Giotto probes.

Those were technically space ships, but they had no power, and were pretty busted up, and no fuel...as I thought, Cars said, "I have a ship."

.....!? We *could* communicate? "But they're broken, right?" I asked.

Cars looked at me. His eyes were a really beautiful blue.

"I can fix them. Since I rode them here from Halley's Comet, I've been studying how these machines function."

When Giotto has passed Halley's Comet, something had gone wrong with the antennae, and all contact with it had been lost for thirty-two minutes. Had that not been because comet dust struck it, but because Cars jumped on board?

"...but we'll need fuel."

"I have plenty."

"Where?"

"Floating above us."

? The Eyed Balloon?

"Eh? Is that...? What is it?"

"Extra mes."

"Extra...?"

"Yes. The universe has looped thirty-six times, and as it ended and began anew thirty-six additional mes arrived."

The ultimate life form could even survive the end of the universe!?

If the universe looped, then history repeated itself, the same fate befell Cars, and he became the ultimate thing thirty-seven times, was flung into space thirty-seven times, made his way to Mars thirty-seven times, and then all thirty-seven Cars had a

team up?

While my mind boggled at the sheer scale of that time, Narancia stopped staring at us open-mouthed, peered through his periscope, and said, "Hey, the moon broke."

He showed me the view. The Eyed Balloon had crumbled, and the thirty-six pieces each turned into Cars. They'd combined their flesh, and had stretched their combined mass out into a giant sphere. Now they and the thirty-six Giotto's they'd held inside the sphere all began falling towards us.

"We'll use a few to repair the machines, and the rest will become fossil fuel," Cars said.

Cars began laying parts from the Giotto's out on the surface of Mars, and assembling them bare-handed into a space ship way more futuristic than either the Giotto or the H. G. Wells. When he didn't have a part, he'd have one of the Extra Cars transform part of their flesh, transforming it into the material he needed. Once the ship was complete, the remaining Extra Cars all melted away without complaint, pouring themselves into the fuel tank. Narancia witnessed this horror show with a series of yelps and squeals, unable to watch it directly, but shocked as I was, I couldn't stop myself from watching the whole thing.

The completed spaceship was conical, with smooth curves. The one remaining Cars came back up the pipes to us, and spoke to Narancia. "Shrink this vehicle to the size of the two of you. I'll compress the remaining air." Narancia did as he was told, and soon Das Boot was so small the two of us could barely fit inside. Cars then inhaled all the air into his lungs. Narancia and I clung to each other inside the miniature submarine, and Cars doubled the size of his upper body, lifted the submarine onto his back, and carried it into the spaceship. He released the air inside, and Narancia put

Das Boot back inside his own body. The interior of the ship was beautifully designed; it was hard to believe it had been pieced together from scrap. It looked like a modern sci-fi movie set.

"If you could build all this," I asked, summoning my nerve. "Why not head to Earth on your own?"

"At first, I didn't have enough materials or extra mes to turn into fuel," Cars said. "My calculations showed that it would be the thirty-seventh universe where I would finally have enough. Twice, I rode Giotto close to the Earth. The first we passed too far from it; the second time I altered Giotto, and turned part of myself into fuel in an attempt to enter the atmosphere, but I had no idea what the correct angle of entry was. If the angle was too shallow, I'd bounce off the atmospheric wall; too steep, and my calculations suggested that at my bulk, the convection and radiation heat would be so great I would vaporize faster than my cells would regenerate. Even if I survived long enough to land I would be critically injured. I would be captured by humans who detected my entry, and sent even farther away on a different rocket. I had to come up with a plan to protect myself while attempting my return to Earth."

After the Giotto probe had surveyed Halley's Comet, it had done a flyby of Earth at a distance of 16,300,000 kilometers, and used the Earth's gravity to accelerate, heading off to survey Comet Grigg-Skjellerup. After that it approached the Earth again, but did not respond to signals, and disappeared. This must be the two occasions he mentioned.

Countless asteroids hit the Earth daily, but almost none of them ever reach the surface because the speed with which they strike the pressurized atmosphere causes high temperature convection heat, and the magnetic energy in the pressurized air causes radiation heat, which burn the meteors up before they land.

"Once I reached Mars, I patiently waited for the right time. The universe looped thirty-six times, and I had enough fuel and materials. And in this thirty-seventh universe, I met an astronaut named Funnier Valentine. Funnier helped me draw up a plan for reentry, and negotiated a mutually profitable arrangement in which, in exchange for his help, I agreed to not eat any Americans. I accepted his offer, and waited for him to arrive."

I see...but why would Funnier want to help such a dangerous life form get back to Earth...wait. Eat?

"You...eat people?" I asked.

Cars looked me right in the eye. "Why do you think I would let you live? Like I said, we only have four hours worth of oxygen. Fueled by the extra mes, this ship will take approximately six months to reach Earth. You would never survive it. Remain calm and allow me to eat you."

Eh.....?

"Wait, you've survived all this time on Mars without eating anything, right?" Narancia yelled. "You can damn well last another six months, asshole! So what if we only have four hours worth of air? There's shit we can do in four hours!"

"As the universe looped thirty-six times, I have done laps of Mars, without eating...until today. While it is not my usual custom, think of it as a celebratory feast."

"No, no, no no! Eat when you get to Earth! Someone other than me!"

"...you are very loud. Your life will only last another four hours either way, and if I stop releasing the air inside my lungs you will all suffocate. Your lives are already at their end. Give it up."

"No! No! No, no!" Narancia said, stamping his foot, tears in his eyes.

"? The air in your lungs? That goes in and out of you every time you take a breath. It'll run out fast, won't it?"

"I do not need to breathe. I am releasing the air gradually."

"Eh? But you said four hours for the three of us."

"The two of you, and the astronaut. Funnier Valentine died without telling me his plan for reentry, you see."

I looked around, and saw Pucci lying in the corner, still in his space suit.

There was a round hole in the helmet where Funnier's Rear Window had fired a bullet, and a bullet hole in the center of his forehead, but the bullet was stuck in that hole, and when I tapped the bullet with my finger it fell out. It had not reached the brain. The holes in his head and helmet were stuffed with red sand, so it was immediately clear who had saved Pucci's life.

That forthright Native American. He'd saved our lives, too. As I honored his memory, Pucci's eyes fluttered open. "Oh, you're awake?" I asked. Pucci ignored me. "Thirty-six extra Cars...?" he muttered.

He'd been awake and listening this whole time?

So, with a boom we bounded off the surface of Mars, left the atmosphere for outer space, and Mars was soon vanishing in our wake. Narancia was lying in a heap on the floor, sobbing. Suddenly an electronic jingle next to him went plu pon pin para para pon and Narancia bounded up, the pebble cell phone in his hand.

I'd forgotten it even existed.

"Ahhhhh, Buccellatiiiiiiiiiii! It's you, right? It's me, Narancia! So much has been going on I forgot I had this phone!" he shouted, excited. Buccellati said something that clearly infuriated him. "Hunhhhhh!?! What the fuck are you talking about? It's all gone to shit here! We aren't even in Morioh any more! We're on fucking Mars! MARS! The planet! Yeah! Hunh?" Then his face shifted to a

sulk, and he handed me the phone. "Buccellati wants to talk to you."

I took the pebble, and put it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Where are you and what are you doing? I will not tolerate fooling around."

Fooling around...we were on a spaceship about to be eaten by the ultimate thing.

I wanted to yell as loud as Narancia, but I restrained myself.

"We have a large number of Morioh citizens hostage. We are treating them well, but we don't mind treating them less well."

What the hell was he talking about?

"You gangsters sure like to talk like gentlemen," I said, "But I know you were massacring people on Nero Nero Island, trying to find your boss."

The Nijimuras and I had witnessed it. The islanders trying to get to the harbor, ambushed by those gangsters, and slaughtered mercilessly.

But Buccellati answered, "Massacre? What massacre?"

"Don't play dumb! Those islanders were trying to escape by boat, and you guys killed them!"

"....? We don't kill civilians."

"Not officially, anyway."

"No...we swore an oath not to."

"Well, you've broken that oath."

"Wait. Where did this massacre happen?"

"On the West side of Nero Nero Island, at the harbor."

".....? We did a circuit of the island, but there was no harbor."

".....?" But I'd seen it. "I'm not lying."

"...it seems not. I don't smell a lie...as strange as that may be to say on the phone."

"....."

"Someone must be hiding part of that island so it can't be seen from inside...? Only one person can do that. Secco Rotario and his Evil Dead."

Heh heh...oh, Secco Rotario's there, too, NYPD Blue had said.

"Well done, Jorge Joestar!" Buccellati said. "I'll thank you when this is all over."

And with that he hung up. He clearly hadn't managed the slightest bit of understanding of the nightmare Narancia and I were in.

I handed the phone back to Narancia.

"Joestar?" Cars said. "*You're* a Jojo, too?"

Oops.

Cars grinned at me. "Clearly there's a lot you have to tell me before I eat you."

Trying not to panic, I prayed that this conversation would last more than four hours.

"Ehhhhhhhhhh? But what about me!?" Narancia shouted. Uh...good luck?

ELEVEN
Gremlin
グレムリン

Word reached me that people were seeing strange 'things' during flights. Other pilots started blaming any airborne mechanical failures on these monsters. They were small, skinny people with no eyes, the stories said, so of course I thought of the 'evil thing' that Faraday had seen the evening Kenton Motorize died.

There were dark pits where his eyes should be. His skin was brown, like any Spanish child.

The times and places of these monsters sightings were all over the place, and at first the targets seemed indiscriminate, but I changed my thinking as stories of this monster began focusing in on me, until the Royal Aero Club's own Jim Graham came in shouting, "I saw it! It was clinging to the underside of my plane! Look!" he added, slapping the side of the plane he'd just landed, a French-borne beauty named Simone. It was a Blériot XI monoplane with two wheels under the main wing and one under the tail, and the panel between the front wheels was hanging open. The engine was visible inside that square hole, and two or three screws near the cylinder had come loose and fallen out. "See!? I thought the engine was making a terrible racket, and this is why!" Jim said, quite beside himself. He explained that he's seen a tiny eyeless creature, maybe 50 centimeters tall, scrabbling about under his plane, doing *something*.

50 cm? That was far smaller than I'd imagined.

"Nah, it didn't look like a Spaniard at all. No way that thing was human. All its teeth were sharpened, and its claws were long and pointy, and it kept grinning at me like it knew I couldn't do anything. It kept messing about down there and then the engine started acting funny and I about shit myself. I turned and came straight back here before that thing made me crash, but it must have dropped off somewhere..."

Jim Graham began carrying a pistol with him whenever he flew, but he never saw the monster again. People began saying the pistol kept it away, and imitating him, but I wasn't so sure. I wanted to prove it was real before I banished it. Prove it was the same

eyeless thing that had shown up at the Motorize Manor.

So I started bringing a camera into my cockpit. A boxy camera made by Kodak, called the Brownie. If anything happened, I would take a snapshot, and if I got a photo I planned to visit the Motorize Manor again, and get Faraday to verify it, but before that happened I got a photo of something else.

I was trying to photograph JG Rollins' stunt flying, and as he turned his Leslie upside-down, I saw the silhouette of a plane through a gap in the clouds far behind him. When I showed the photo around nobody in the club had ever seen anything like it, but I was pretty sure I had. I knew I'd seen it somewhere but I couldn't quite remember where until one day the dots finally connected. I'd never seen the plane itself. I'd only seen the schematics for it. When it was just a dream, a scribbling in his notes in the Motorize shed. Yes. It was Steven's Motorizing.

Steven was supposed to be in France, so why was he flying close to the Dover coast? If he'd flown all the way from France this was not a public flight. This was not an era where just anyone could cross country lines whenever they liked. Was he flying home from France? But if he was flying back from France on a plane of his own design people would be talking about it, and word would have reached us.

To begin with, I had no idea what Steven was even doing in France. France and England had never really got along but eight years ago they'd signed a trade agreement and travel between the two countries was quite common. I had a lot of pilot friends in France, but none of them had ever heard of Steven Motorize, and none of the airplane makers had heard of him, either. It was still a very small industry, so if he was openly involved in it I would almost certainly have heard something about him. So he must not be openly involved, I guess. He was flying his plane in secret. His own original creation. It cost money to make an airplane, so that

must be coming from the Motorize coffers. Since Darlington was clearly becoming the official heir, she should be aware of what Steven was up to.

With that thought in mind I visited the Motorize home for the first time in five years. After the Kenton Murder case wound up impossible to prosecute further, Ben Motorize lost all appetite for business. He'd more or less withdrawn from it, and had retired to a resort town in American called Miami. Darlington was running the estate and the business all by herself. She'd become even more beautiful, and even more imposing. When I showed her the photo I'd taken, she grimaced. ".....so?"

"Tell me what Steven's doing."

"....."

"Don't tell me this plane isn't funded with Motorize money. And I highly doubt Motorize money is funding anything you don't know about."

"...you've really grown a backbone, Jorge Joestar."

"...thanks?" I said, certain now that I was right. Darlington was buying herself time to think. About what she should tell me. Which meant she knew something. Ignoring her attempts to deflect, I pushed for an answer. "I know a lot about planes, and I know this is the Motorizing Steven was designing. The most distinctive aspect is this single-seat design. It looks like a two-seater, but it isn't. He designed it this way so that he can easily fly back to the cockpit if he has to jump out of the plane for any reason. This gives him somewhere to fold his wings. No other plane would need the like."

Darlington stared silently at me for a while, but at last she said, "Why today?" but it sounded like she was talking to herself, and before I could try to say anything she said something that came as a complete surprise to me. "Jorge, do you think it's possible for the dead to come back to life?"

"Eh.....?" What? Was she deflecting again? But then...? "I don't even need to think about it. It's not possible."

I was lying. I knew the truth. Some dead became zombies.

But that wasn't coming back to life again, that was the dead acting as if they were alive, drinking human blood, and devouring human flesh.

A shiver ran down my spine. A flavor of fear I had not felt in some time. I thought I had left all that behind me on the Canary Islands.

I did my best to keep it from showing. Darlington stared at me intently for another minute, then said, "...yes, but not everyone thinks that way, and there are cultural and religious precedents."

Jesus Christ resurrected three days after being crucified. People all across the world believed that was true.

".....? What do you mean by this? Does Steven believe this is possible?"

"I don't know. But my father and Steven are betting on that possibility. They want Kenton back."

".....! What...!? But how...?"

"...while you were studying planes, Steven and my father have been studying ways to bring back the dead. And they found a place in South America that had stories about it, and found some sort of proof that some ritual had actually given life to the dead."

"They did...?"

"A folk religion called Vodou. They have a kind of sorcerer called a Bokor, who is set to chant a spell that causes the dead to rise to their feet. Though still dead, they stand. They call these undead zombies."

Zombies!? This was starting to sound a lot like what Straits had told me.

"It was slaves that brought Vodou to America originally," Darlington continued. "It seems to have started as a religion on the African continent, but South America is a strange land, and parts of the continent have their own legends of the dead coming back. The Aztecs believed that the dead would become their king. Jorge, have you heard of the stone mask?"

This caught me off guard, and I stuttered, "Wh-what? The

stone mask? What stone mask?"

"A tool used to turn the Aztec King into the living dead. We've learned that your father, Jonathan Joestar, spent quite some time studying the mask. It was a long time ago now, but my father once visited your home, and remembers seeing the mask hanging on the wall in the parlor."

I couldn't keep feigning innocence. I stopped protesting, and simply waited to see where Darlington's story would take us. She pressed on towards the heart of the matter. "That parlor burned with the rest of the Joestar mansion in the great fire twenty-four years ago...but do you know what happened in that house the night of the fire?" Darlington did not wait for me to answer. "Your grandfather, also named George Joestar, gathered a bunch of policemen to arrest his adopted son, Dio Brando, who was trying to murder him. They all died. But they weren't burned to death. Not one person there died in the fire. All the policemen were murdered before the fire began, in the most horrible, horrific manner possible. We've obtained a copy of the police report describing the condition of the bodies. Their arms and legs were torn off, their heads split in half. One of the policemen had two holes in his head. As if... two fingers had punctured his skull."

.....! Darlington may not have noticed, but even I didn't know the story in that much detail. All I knew was that Dio Brando had put the mask on, murdered my grandfather, and when blood hit the mask he'd turned into a vampire and slaughtered the cops.

"Part of the Joestar mansion that survived the fire had similar round holes on the ceiling, and on the wall two rows of parallel holes like someone had walked straight up the wall, smashing their feet through it with every step. That night, twenty-four years ago, something was in the Joestar mansion, something with unnatural power. And we know that the Aztec kings had similarly inhuman power. The stone mask links Aztec legends and the Joestar mansion, and ties both to a third place. A town in a valley known as Wind Knight's Lot."

By this point I couldn't help but be impressed. She'd done her homework well.

"That town was wiped out in a single night. The only survivors were a young girl and her brother. It seems someone swore them to secrecy. There should have been bodies everywhere, but they were all taken away by some powerful group. Steven and my father managed to get those two survivors to tell everything. They tried money at first, but apparently using Dio Brando's name and showing them a photograph of him was far more effective. The sister told them the truth. Dio Brando came to that town and turned everyone there into the living dead."

Darlington had stepped right into the heart of the matter, and she kept on walking.

"And then their gaze turned towards the ship that sank while you parents were on their honeymoon. They investigated. They wanted to find the ship's wreck, but couldn't find it anywhere, so all they could do was check the records from the port it left from. They found one suspicious piece of cargo. A large box...and the owner's name was listed only as 'DB'. One of the dock workers who helped carry the box on board told them it was a big, sturdy black box that looked like a coffin. And another dock worker gave them an even more sinister statement – he said he'd heard a voice from inside it. Jorge, we know that when your mother was rescued by Canary Island fisherman in the Atlantic Ocean, she was afloat on a large box that looked very like a coffin. And Jorge, I'm sure you know how Steven and your father came by that statement."

"....."

"They went to La Palma in the Canary Islands, and learned more than the history of your family. They found that 73 people had died in the island church in 1905. And that evening, a mysterious group had declared curfew on the island...essentially declaring martial law. Steven and father investigated further, and found the same group had come to the island five years earlier, and done the same thing, doing something so terrifying the islanders refuse to

speak of it at all. Jorge, I'm sure you remember this. The incident with the Torres family. Alejandro Torres came to your school, looking young again, walking on the ceiling, with large fangs sticking out of his mouth. And the ones who defeated this monster were you and the girl who'd been living with you – Lady Elizabeth Straits. Five years later, on the second night of horror, she worked with that mysterious group, and left the Joestar home for good. After that we were unable to trace her movements, but she was always with you when you needed her. Any time you were in trouble, she would come. Right? She even stayed in the Westwood jail with you."

I really didn't expect her to know that. "How...?"

"I'm the one who tracked that lead down. Had to use a photo of Elizabeth Straits in grade school. Even as a kid she was a beauty, very mature looking. When I showed it to the police officers, they all acted like they'd been struck by lightning. Their eyes went blank, and they passed out. She left them seriously damaged. I have no idea what she could have done to knock out all those men, but several of them definitely remembered seeing Elizabeth Straits, seeing her walking freely in and out of the jail. The police officers themselves had no idea how or why she was able to do that, but I think you know, Jorge. It's obvious she was only there because you were."

She saw through everything. Embarrassment threatened to turn my face red, but I desperately tried to keep my poker face going. "I understand now why you never showed interest in other girls, Jorge," Darlington said. "A girl that impressive already had you locked up. Your feelings, your heart, your very body – she's got them all tamed. She's trained you so well you'd never even consider cheating on her."

"Eh...?" She has?

The look on my face must have been a sight, because Darlington burst out laughing. "Ah ha ha ha ha! Sorry, sorry. I just couldn't resist. No, I think the truth is, very few girls can live up to

someone so beautiful and...and amazing."

"Oh..." Wait, what were we talking about?

"My point is," Darlington said, getting back on track. "My father and brother are so desperate to bring my sister back to life that they've gone a bit too far. The Aztec legends, the stone mask, the incident at the Joestar mansion, and Elizabeth Straits herself have all led them to finding the group she works with. Today. I just received word from Steven. Steven thinks I agree with what they're doing. But I don't. I mean...she was my sister, and it was a great tragedy, but dead is dead. Steven's crime won't vanish if he brings her back, and now that she's dead...even if Kenton comes back to life there's no guarantee she'll be the same Kenton we once knew. Especially given the Aztec legends and everything that happened with Dio Brando, which suggest that all this will lead to nothing but sadness and horror."

It would. Lisa Lisa and the rest of them were fighting every day to prevent that.

"What Steven's trying to do," I said, "Will almost certainly not pay for his sins, or honor Kenton's memory."

I remembered what my mother had said seven years ago, on La Palma.

You should stay, too. This story concerns not just the Joestar family, but all mankind.

Wind Knight's Lot may be a small country town, but even then the reason almost everyone had been turned into a zombie in a single night was because once a zombie drank your blood or ate your flesh you turned into a zombie, too. And that infection spread with terrifying speed. That was the reason the Hamon masters had ordered the villagers not to leave their homes when the Antonio Torres incident was going down on La Palma.

"Tell me, Jorge. What should I do? My family have lost their minds, and I can't stop them. I hate to say it, but most of the Motorize fortune is under their control, and I can't stop them using it how they please."

"...I'll start by contacting Lisa Lisa...Elizabeth Straits. I'll warn her about what's going on here. And I'll ask her to take care of your father and Steven gently. Don't worry, Darlington. How can I put this...the group Elizabeth Straits is with is made up entirely of amazing people, and they're all people you can trust. I'm sure they'll be able to help your father and Steven see reason."

"Really? Are you sure, Jorge? They won't let Kenton turn into a zombie?"

"I'm sure." Even if she did turn into a zombie, Lisa Lisa would destroy her in the blink of an eye. "You don't need to be scared of anything like that."

A shudder ran over Darlington, and she burst into tears. "Thank god! I was so scared. I can't tell you how much!"

I considered putting my arms around her suddenly frail-looking shoulders, but decided against it, striking a cheerful tone.

"Ha ha ha, what a coincidence I happened to take a picture of Steven's plane and stop by just in time!"

Why today? Darlington had said, but wasn't it a good thing I'd come today?

"That's not what I meant," Darlington said, but before she could say anything else a car pulled up out front, and when she saw it she hastily wiped her tears.

A tall man got out of the car, greeted Faraday, and strode into the house as if he owned the place, calling out, "I'm home, Dar!" Home?

Dar? I thought only Steven and Kenton called her that.

"Let me introduce you, Jorge," Darlington said, smiling, and rising to greet the man coming down the hall and making his leather boots squeak loudly on the hardwood floor.

"Oh, Dar! I went to put a bouquet on the cliff tops, say a prayer, and let your mother know our good news!" he said as he stepped in. He was a rather handsome man, of a significantly more impressive build than my own, and I was instantly in a bad mood. Was this because I'd already guessed who he must be?

"Oh, we have company? I do apologize," he said with a pleasant smile I found infuriating.

"William, this is Jorge Joestar," Darlington said. "Jorge, this is my fiancé, William Cardinal."

Cardinal's eyes went wide, then he smiled broadly and held out his hand. "Ohhh, you're Mr. Jorge Joestar! Well met, sir. What brings you here today?"

I had nothing to say to him. "I heard of your engagement, and came to congratulate you both. Congratulations." I said, and shook his big, thick hand.

"Oh? Well, thank you very much."

With the handshake complete, neither one of us said another word. We both knew already we had nothing to say to each other.

"....."

"....."

"Um, Jorge, thank you very much for coming," Darlington said, breaking the silence. "I'll see you to the door."

"Oh, mm."

Darlington went out in the hall, and Cardinal came with us, apparently not needing an invitation. "Jorge, you'll come to our wedding, won't you?"

Hunh? "...sorry, but I think I'd better not. Given my...history with this family, I doubt I'd be very welcome."

"True enough!" Cardinal chuckled. I cringed, but whatever.

I greeted Faraday at the door, and as I stepped outside Cardinal said, "Since you said it first...you do tend to be a bad influence, here. Could I ask that you not ever visit here again? We've got enough work today rebuilding the Motorize name, and as grateful as Dar is for your friendship, from this point on we've got to do this as a couple, you see."

I turned around and looked at Darlington, but she wouldn't meet my eye. All the power I'd felt from her when I'd arrived had vanished into thin air, and she was dithering like someone else entirely. Cardinal put his hand on her shoulders, and said, "Right,

Dar? What's wrong? You seem out of it. Are you tired? Get it together."

Then Darlington said, "Oh, heh heh heh, sorry," and smiled and got 'it' together. "Thank you for everything, Jorge. Both our houses have seen too much tragedy, but personally you still have my trust. Goodbye, Jorge Joestar. Give my best wishes to your family."

Her words sounded like the heir to the house, but the strength had left her eyes. But I said nothing. It was her family, and her life.

I gave a quick wave, and left the Motorize manor.

I went home, called mother at work, and had her contact Lisa Lisa. About ten minutes later the phone rang. Lisa Lisa wouldn't tell me where she was, but I told her what Darlington had told me. "I don't know anything about this man Cardinal, but we're already watching the Motorize men. It'll be fine. Frankly, the fact that he has his own airplane design might come in handy."

Hunh...

"Jorge, it's still a ways off, but war is coming."

"Yeah. The RAC has been working with the Navy, and soon enough they'll officially be the Navy's airborne division."

"...don't die, OK?"

"I won't," I said. "Planes won't be used for anything but scouting, anyway, and how exactly are they going to knock us out of the sky? Only way we'll crash is sloppy maintenance."

Shortly after that the English Royal Flying Corps was officially created, and I joined the Royal Naval Air Service. While learning how to fly a hydroplane I took part in training on how to take off and land from the deck of a new type of warship, which I thought went pretty well. Once I put my hands on the flight stick I stopped thinking about anything complicated or difficult, and focused. Being dumb was a great help. But while plenty of guys

could take off and land on a ship at harbor the only pilots who could do that from the deck of an aircraft carrier sailing across the ocean were me and Jim Graham, so I was just thinking that aircraft carriers weren't going to be all that useful when the world went to war.

The heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire's throne was killed by a Serbian, and they declared war against Serbia. Germany and Austria had joined the Triple Alliance, and while dealing with Serbia also invaded Belgium intent on swiftly taking down France, but since they'd suddenly attacked a neutral country England also joined the war, and since Russia mobilized far faster than expected Germany demanded that Austria deal with the Russian assault and Austria plunged into chaos. The third member of the Triple Alliance, Italy, initially ignored Austria's territorial dispute before eventually joining England and France. At the same time the Ottoman Empire, itself locked in a territorial dispute with Russia, threw in with Germany and Austria, and since Japan and England had signed a treaty, Japan joined the war, and the British Empire's territories Canada, Australia, and New Zealand all pitched in and quite literally all the world was now mixed up in this war.

So I fought, too.

The main duty of the Royal Naval Air Service was finding enemy ships and submarines, and at first we flew hydroplanes in pairs watching the English Channel, but since Jim and I could take off and land on an aircraft carrier we got moved to the great wide open North Sea.

For the first two weeks I was partnered with a navigator named Frank Demarast, but he kept muttering, "It's your fault I'm out here risking my life," over my shoulder the whole time we flew and eventually it got to me and I punched him the moment we landed and fired his ass. Frank seemed grateful, though.

Certainly there were a hell of a lot more enemy ships. But finding them saved a lot of English lives. The ship's guns almost never hit, and compared to the trench warfare the army was bogged

down in we got to be up in the sky and free and enjoy ourselves so what the hell was so damn scary, I thought, but fine, he was scared, and I couldn't be bothered getting another navigator so I started flying alone and doing some pretty crazy shit.

I piled bombs in Frank's empty seat, and used them to bombard German ships from the air. I knew they were actively developing proper bombing equipment, but until that reached me I wanted to do what I could. Unless you did something really stupid planes weren't about to get hit by any ships, and from the sky battleships looked super unprotected. So I tried tossing bombs out of the plane as I flew over them and like I expected, they hit and I was officially getting results. I was pleased. It was much better to have me blow them up than having English ships fight them head on with lots of casualties.

Jim disagreed. "We should just do what we're told to do. If we fly right over a battleship we're much more likely to get shot down, and there's no glory in death."

Hmmm...that way of thinking was kinda shitty considering we'd already earned a relatively safe job flying planes. I said as much and Jim and I had the fight we'd never quite got around to before the war started. I mean Jim didn't say that shit lightly, and only felt comfortable speaking his mind on the matter because it was me he was talking to, but it still felt cowardly to think like that considering all the other English soldiers out fighting for England right now. If we weren't motivated to protect people we'd never make it through this war, I thought. I felt pretty smug about it, but a single bullet ended that.

Bang. I was flying Star Shooter – a hydroplane I'd made a few modifications to, and there was now a hole open in the right side of it. I stared at it, confused. How had I been shot from the side?

Had Jim finally snapped and turned that pistol of his on me? I looked to my right, and saw a German Albatros headed right towards me, and the machine gun barrels on both sides of the body

spit fire again. Bratatatata! They hit. Not me, but Jim's Simone hydroplane; he'd been just above me on my left, saw the Albatros attacking before I did, and tried to gain some distance. His wings had gone diagonal, and the hail of bullets licked the length of them.

The body broke in half before the wings broke up, cracking like an egg and dropping Jim like a yolk towards the ocean below, so I quickly ducked Star Shooter under him and caught him in mid-air. When he fell on the pile of bombs behind me I gulped a second but they didn't blow up and I didn't have time to worry about it anyway. I had to dodge the wreckage of Simone as it fell all around me, and for a moment I caught the eye of Jim's navigator, Peter Fraiser, as he and the rear seat fell with the tail. Peter was trying to stand up out of his seat like he planned to jump over to my plane and I wanted to catch him but I had to move away from him to avoid the remains of Simone's wings and we both knew I wouldn't make it in time even if I tried to come back for him.

"Jorge, he's coming back!" Jim roared behind me, so I made a sharp turn, found the Albatros coming at us, and yanked my stick to avoid the gunfire. The Albatros turned and followed close on my tail, so I rocked the plane left and right, making it hard to get a bead on us...as a feint, but the moment the Albatros started getting comfortable with our speed I suddenly shot upwards. I kept that nose up as the sky flipped up side down and we were flying upside down. "Auggghhhh!" Jim yelled behind me. The bombs in the back seat went flying out, bouncing off Jim as he tried desperately not to fall out.

I'd never even tried to fly upside-down, and even though I pulled it off the Albatros calmly made a sharp turn and parked itself on our tail as I righted us so I told Jim to throw a bomb at it. "I'll never hit it!" Jim shouted. "Just throw them! They don't have to hit!" I yelled back, and brandished my pistol. "Arghhh," Jim yelled, not following my drift at all. He threw a bomb, and I shot at it. Bang! Bang! Bang!

The bomb exploded in the air with a tremendous booom

right next to the Albatros, and the blast and fire knocked it sideways, and must have burned the pilot badly, since the plane dropped away without correcting course.

"Jesus...can you do that again?" Jim asked. Because there were two more Albatros planes coming towards us.

"Nope! Let's run for it." We had to get this information to our forces.

But these Albatros fighter planes not only had the machine guns timed to the propellers so they could fire through them without hitting, they were also much faster than the old models, and they caught us in no time. I couldn't dodge the volleys fast enough and they blew off my tail wing.

"Fuckers!" Jim yelled, and this time threw a bomb and tried to shoot it with his own pistol, but before he could pull the trigger the enemy bullets hit it and boooooom the two Albatros planes shot straight into the blast radius, came out on fire, and in the ensuing panic tapped wings, lost their balance, crashed into each other again, got stuck together, and fell away, still entangled.

We watched this in silence, then both broke up laughing. "...ha ha ha!" "That was lucky!"

I turned around and shook hands with Jim, then stared at the tail of Star Shooter, with its missing wings. Jim followed my gaze. "Well," I said. "Emergency landing it is."

Jim shrugged. "In the middle of the North Sea? Guess that's better than what Peter got."

"...sorry about Peter."

"Heh. Nobody could have saved him. I should be thanking you. Seriously, man. I owe you one."

"If your plane hadn't split open so perfectly I could never have done it, and even then I just happened to be in exactly the right place."

"Yeah..." Jim was starting to shake. I turned back around, facing forward. So, I thought. How close to our forces would I be able to get?

Not at all close, I decided instantly. That first shot from the side had scratched the fuel tank, and the fuel gauge showed we were out of petrol...and no sooner did I notice than we ran out completely, and the engines sputtered, and the propellers stopped. We were still 800 meters up. We were in for a long fall. "It'll be fine! I'll land this thing on the water, no problem!" I shouted. "I'm getting rid of these bombs," Jim yelled, and started throwing them overboard. One after another they vanished into the low-lying clouds around us. Everything around us was white. Except...

Between the silhouettes of the unmoving propeller blades was a tiny face. A face with no eyes. It was grinning at me, its mouth filled with fangs. There was petrol running down its chin like drool.

We hadn't run out of fuel. He'd sucked it all out.

The little monster gargled the petrol, cackling, "Hey, Jorge Joestar...I'm afraid you're gonna die here. And after you're dead, I'm gonna kill your family, too. Their deaths will be even worse than yours."

Kee hee hee hee hee hee!

The laugh was so shrill it made Jim squeal behind me. He could see it, too. See the monster that knew my name. It had brown skin, unruly brown hair, and the way it was grinning at me...I knew him, I thought.

Who was he? I grabbed the camera I kept in my seat, and pressed the shutter.

Snap!

A moment later, we were out of the clouds, could see around us, and the face between the propellers was gone. Neither of us said a word at first.

"Uh, Jim...you saw that, right?" I asked, still peering through the viewfinder at the propellers. He didn't answer. "Hey!

Did you see it?" I asked, turning around. Jim Graham's mouth was wide open, his eyes rolled back, and he was clawing at his throat with both hands.

"...kk...gah...mm.....gahhh!" He was forcing fragments of sound out, but there was something stuffed inside his throat, preventing him from talking.

What!? Was he having a seizure!? "Jim! What's going on!? Hey!" I shouted. Jim's eyes locked on to mine and for a second I had hope, and then he shoved his own hand all the way into his mouth, shoved it even farther back, grabbed something and yanked it out...his own tongue. Jim seemed too far gone to know that, and kept pulling with all his strength, stretching his tongue until he'd pulled it a good 30 centimeters out of his mouth. It was no longer just his tongue; he was now pulling out flesh that belonged inside his throat. But Jim wouldn't stop pulling it. "Hey...Jim! Stop! What are you doing!? Stop!!!"

What the fuck!? What was he doing!? I was starting to panic, but Jim didn't give a shit, he just grabbed the mess of flesh with both hands and pulled even harder, and everything inside came out like potatoes from the ground. One hand kept pulling while the other was squeezing everything that came out, and then I noticed that he'd even managed to pull out part of his own ribs, and I nearly threw up. Jim's eyes had rolled back in his head again, but there was blood coming out his eyelids and his ears and his nose and he looked totally dead except his hands wouldn't stop moving. When his stomach and small intestines tried to follow his esophagus out they caught on his jaw, but he tried to force them out anyway, and he pulled so hard his stomach ripped in half and his hands snapped forward flinging blood and bits of organs in my direction. I turned quickly away but they splattered across the back of my head and dripped down my neck and this was so unbelievably gross I couldn't stand it any more and puked all over my cockpit. Bleergh. Bleeeeeeeeeeeergghhhhh!

Tears running down my face, I threw up every last thing in

my stomach. Behind me, Jim's hands were still moving. He was now alternating hands, ripping out pieces of the organs jammed in his mouth, tossing them out into the air.

My plane was about to crash, and what was happening behind me was so horrific I could barely think straight. For a moment, I wondered if Jim and I should just plunge straight town into the ocean to our deaths, but I thought better of it.

Fuck dying here.

My mind cleared. Even since the war started there'd been a part of me that was OK dying in combat, that accepted the notion that there was honor in a death like that, but that was bullshit. Maybe there were places where it was worth dying, but this wasn't fucking one of them.

I stopped watching Jim throw his insides out into the ocean. This was no time to let my mind be clouded by that madness. I faced forward, fixed my eyes on the rapidly approaching ocean surface, and kept them there.

Splat, slurp, schluuunk! Mixed into the constant sound of flesh being dragged out of him, I could heard a voice whispering, "Jorge...Jorge, Jorge, Jorge...help...help me..." Wait. Wait for now. The Star Shooter's about to hit the ocean!

At the last second, I lifted the nose of the Star Shooter, touching the wing-less tail to the water's surface. Gently, softly, quietly. The Star Shooter ran across the water's surface, water spraying behind it, and I gradually let the weight of the plane settle on the water until the floats on either side had touched down. If the sea had been flat like a mirror, it would have been an absolutely beautiful landing, but the waves rocked me, wham, thunk, and each blow forced me to yank my stick up and down, trying to soften the blows. In time, we slowed down, and finally came to a stop.

I'd touched down successfully. I took a deep breath, let it out, and then turned to see why Jim had gone silent. He was curled up in the round seat, not moving at all. There was blood all over the floor and seat and the plane around it. Bits of flesh were stuck here and there, clinging to the walls and sliding down the instrument panel.

I stood up, reached over, and put my fingers to Jim's throat, checking for a pulse. There was none. He wasn't breathing, either. He was dead. Staring at the body of my friend, I sat down on the armored plate in front of the cockpit, wondering just what in the hell I could do next. I should have been celebrating the landing with Jim, but now I was all alone.

The surface of the North Sea was dark, the sky was blue, the clouds high above, the breeze crisp but gentle.

My second time adrift, I thought, but no, that wasn't quite right, the first time I hadn't even been born yet. Perhaps I'd listened to mother's story a little too intently. It must have been very hard for her to deal with vampire Dio while holding baby Lisa Lisa and hiding my father's head, but here I was bobbing all alone. Which of us had it worse? There was no comparing our experiences, and no point in comparing them. Mother survived her experience...then I started wondering why it had even occurred to me to try comparing out experiences, and I realized it was because I was confident that I would survive mine, too.

Why did I think that? There could only be one answer.

Lisa Lisa. I had her.

I waited confidently for Lisa Lisa to get here, soaking in the sun. That made me sleepy, so I went to sleep. The sound of an airplane engine woke me.

Vrroooooooooom...the sound of the propellers woke me, but I didn't open my eyes. She'd come, I knew, and the satisfaction of finding out that I'd been right about came as a mild surprise, but got ignored because I'd been listening to engine sounds a while now and knew what they all sounded like but this engine wasn't one I'd

ever heard before. If it wasn't English or French did that mean it was German? An enemy? I opened my eyes and looked up to see a hydroplane coming towards me of a unique shape I knew at once. I'd seen the designs for it pinned to the wall in his workshed. This was the Motorizing, the plane Steven Motorize designed.

It looked like a two-seater and was actually a single-seater but there were two people aboard and the one in back was clearly Lisa Lisa. And the other...?

436 **We're already watching the Motorize men. It'll be fine. Frankly, the fact that he has his own airplane design might come in handy,** Lisa Lisa had said. I found my fists curling up, my body tense.

As Motorizing got low enough, Lisa Lisa clearly couldn't wait any more, and leaned out of her seat...no, wait, she straight up climbed out of it holding onto the side of the plane with only one hand and foot, the end of her dress flapping in the wind for a second before she jumped off about five meters over the water.

"Eeek!" My heart leaped to my throat but she splashed down calmly...without much splash at all. She just slid along the surface of the water, kicking up spray as she killed her momentum, then stood up and came running across the water like an ice skater. Directly towards me. "Jorge! Are you alright!?"

As I gaped at her, vroooooooooommm the Motorizing turned over my head, as if hesitant about landing. I looked up. The man in the cockpit lifted his goggles, and met my gaze. I couldn't read his expression, but it was Steven. Ten years older. He'd lost a little weight and there was a harshness around his eyes, but he was the same dude I'd been so into planes with.

Steven and I just looked at each other, making no attempt at greeting. We just made sure the other was alive, that we could each see the other, and that we'd be able speak to each other again.

Steven lowered his goggles, and the Motorize began slowly descending, and touched down. How I felt as I watched this I still don't really know. Was I mad at him for framing me for Kenton's

murder, sad because he'd betrayed me, or honestly glad to see him again?

And when I looked at Steven and instantly thought that he was innocent after all...was that just because I wanted him to be? Since meeting John Moore-Brabazon and getting into cars and airplanes I'd had fun with a lot of different people but even now I still tended to latch onto friends, which meant I might still be fixated on Steven.

"Jorge! You aren't hurt, are you? Thank god!" Lisa Lisa said, throwing her arms around me, tears in her eyes. He'd brought her to me, he'd brought Lisa Lisa to me, so did that mean I could trust him? "Lisa Lisa," I said. "How'd you know where I was?"

"Um, there's a Hamon master named Tom Petty. He can use Hamon to predict what will happen in the future."

"Oh...he can see the future? He's always right?"

"...as far as I know."

"So why'd he do that for me?"

"Heh heh. It wasn't free, you know. There's something we'll need you to do. But first, you want to talk to Steven, right?"

"....." Did I? I was a little scared. It felt more like I sort of had to talk to him now that he was here.

"I'm sorry I just brought him like this," Lisa Lisa said, as if reading my mind. "But this morning Tom Petty suddenly told me he'd predicted you'd crash, and the only pilot I could get to fly me to a battlefield right away was Steven."

That meant Steven and Lisa Lisa had been close by this morning. "You seem close. What are you and Steven up to?"

"I'm sure Steven will tell you. ...Jorge, I know it's been a while, but you're still the only man for me."

And with that, Lisa Lisa kissed me on the cheek, a gentle kiss without any Hamon, and it occurred to me we hadn't kissed on the lips since that temple underground in Rome and maybe it was time we started being more grown-up...and then I got really carried away but part of me was also going eh? With Lisa Lisa? Really?

But this was no time to get lost in that mess again. The sound of those propellers was slowing down as Steven taxied the Motorizing over to us.

What should I say? Was it even my job to speak first here? Steven was the one who'd killed Kenton and framed me for it and gone into hiding.

In the end, he spoke first. "Been a while, Jorge. Sorry I couldn't get in touch with you. After you got arrested I started chasing the real killer, trying to prove you were innocent. Then three years later I was a suspect, and the police were looking for me, so I couldn't go back to England. ...my father also suggested that if I were arrested, they'd force a guilty verdict so they could secretly hand me over to the military and do experiments on me. But let me make one thing absolutely clear here, Jorge. I did *not* kill Kenton. She was killed by a Spanish-speaking midget with no eyes."

I had no idea what to say. He kept talking. "Kenton had been telling me about him for months before he killed her. She said when she flew while the clouds were dark or it was raining, a monster would show up. She said it would laugh at her, say things that she thought might be in Spanish, and do things to her or the plane. But I never caught a glimpse of it, no matter how closely I watched. She swore it had shown up right in front of me. The cloth on the glider tore, screws or nuts on the wings came loose, sometimes there were even scratches on her body, and it was obvious that something was going on while she was flying. But neither of us took it all that seriously. I think these wings of mine made us used to weird shit like that."

Weird shit?

Jesus, what this thing had done went way beyond weird shit.

I remembered trying to repair Motorizing 5 after pulling that out of the water at the bottom of those cliffs. I'd found two sets of four claw marks. The day before Kenton died. I'd totally forgotten about that.

Steven went on. "But one day Kenton picked the words "Horhe Joestar" out of the monster's Spanish muttering. She thought that must mean you, Jorge. She didn't know much Spanish but she could tell what the monster was saying was insulting, maybe even a curse of some kind. And as your friend, Kenton wouldn't stand for that. She got mad, and yelled at it, and it turned its empty eyes on her and said, 'You're going to die,' in English, and then it vanished. That didn't scare Kenton at all. She just got mad, and worried about you. She insisted we had to tell you about this the next time we saw you, warn you a weird monster was taking your name in vain and up to something evil. It was raining the next day, and she was called to the cliffs by someone using your name, but you weren't there, and she was murdered. And you were framed for it. Jorge, when I got to the cliffs it was standing over Kenton with a knife in its hand. I saw it vanish over the edge of the cliff."

A child with no eyes that spoke Spanish.

The thing Faraday had seen that day in the Motorize Manor was what had killed Kenton...? It had cursed my name? It had framed me for the murder?

Hey, Jorge Joestar...I'm afraid you're gonna die here. And after you're dead, I'm gonna kill your family, too. Their deaths will be even worse than yours.

So I wasn't imagining that?

"So...what's this about you trying to bring Kenton back to life?"

Steven nodded as if expecting the question. "Dar told you?"

Yeah, truth is, we were looking into the possibility. But then Lisa Lisa came along, and I saw a real zombie...and knew it would be an unforgivable sin to make Kenton into one of those horrible things."

So we all climbed into Steven's Motorizing and headed for France. We had to leave Star Shooter behind, and look for a chance to file a report about it and Jim's body. Steven flew the plane, and I sat behind him with Lisa Lisa on my lap, my arms around her. Her face was bright red, and mine felt like it was on fire. Lisa Lisa and I kept talking, only partly to distract ourselves. I told her all about the rumors of the eyeless midget that had been running around the English Air Service. Lisa Lisa and Steven both thought long and hard about this. At length Steven asked, "Did it say anything about you?"

"Nobody ever said anything like that. Very few people even mentioned it speaking Spanish. It always just shows up out of nowhere while they're flying, breaks something, and then vanishes. Sometimes it speaks Spanish, sometimes it doesn't; the height varies from gnome-like 50 centimeters to the normal child-sized one I saw. And lately the descriptions of it vary as well. Some say it looks like a lizard with giant ears, others say it has horns growing out of its head; the only common ground is that it always has dark pits where its eyes should be."

"...the descriptions vary lately? Hmm. How many stories in all?" Lisa Lisa asked.

"I couldn't even begin to count. Some days it appears in multiple places. Some people have started calling them gremlins. No idea where that name came from."

"In that case, there has to be more than one gremlin."

"Undoubtedly. I don't know what's going on with the French pilots or other countries, but the English are flying planes over the channel and over the North Sea, and there are witnesses from all sectors."

"Right...and these reports started happening all at once, all over the place? Or did it seem like they started in one place and spread out?"

"Uh...now that you mention it, I'm not sure. I first heard about it from someone who'd been sent from the Royal Aero Club to train with the Navy."

"But that was after 1910, right?" Steven asked. "Kenton saw it back in 1905. These things have been in the skies over Westwood for years."

"When did you start flying?" Lisa Lisa asked.

"1903."

"Did you see it then?"

"No...it think it was around March in 1905....that's the first time Kenton started talking about them, anyway. March, yeah."

"Jorge, you moved to England from the Canary Islands in February 1905," Lisa Lisa said, pointedly.

".....!?"

The implication there left Steven speechless, so I said, "And in October of that year, the evening Kenton was killed, he was in the Motorize Manor."

Steven nearly lost it when I told him Faraday's story. "What the...!? Why the hell didn't he ever tell us!?"

Almost certainly because he couldn't believe what he'd seen. It was a child with no eyes, after all. **Thinking back on it now I believe that was something evil in the shape of a child.** And since I vanished immediately afterward, Faraday dared not speak of it. **I've been too terrified. Much too terrified.**

"That settles it. This thing is definitely after you, Jorge," Lisa Lisa said. "If it speaks Spanish, it must have followed you from the Canary Islands."

A monster child with no eyes!?

When we finally reached France, the Hamon masters were

waiting for Lisa Lisa, and they led us to their secret underground lair. It was close to the German border, right in the heart of the fighting, but the Hamon masters were all totally calm about, as if it didn't concern them, which really drove home that they were fighting something else entirely.

I handed over my camera, asked them to get the contents developed, and while we were waiting for that, I was introduced to a bald Tibetan Man named Ngapoi Ngawang Tom Petty.

The moment he laid eyes on me, he called me by name.

"Jorge Joestar."

"Nice to meet you, Master Tom Petty."

"You have entered my dreams many times now. To me, it feels as if we have met many times before. It is an honor to meet you in person."

An honor? "I'm just a soldier."

"You are Jonathan Joestar's son."

Oh, he met my Dad? Instantly I became obnoxiously proud. "I hear he was quite a man." Even as a severed head he was oddly impressive.

But Tom Petty just laughed. "A man? He was barely a man at all. He was a spoiled boy, weak willed, not very smart, and prone to taking the easy way out. But he had a glimmer of courage. Jorge Joestar, it can be very difficult to summon even a modest amount of courage in the face of overwhelming fear. When fear left the rest of us frozen to the spot, trying not to piss ourselves, he had the wild courage to take one step forward, and say something rude. And you seem to have inherited that courage."

"Ehhhhhh....?" I was genuinely surprised. "I couldn't begin to do what my Dad did."

Fighting one on one with a vampire that had just slaughtered a bunch of cops, throwing himself into a village where nearly the entire population had just been turned into zombies? No fucking way.

"Courage is not a thing that shows up in your imagination,"

Tom Petty said. "It's something you squeeze out of yourself when face to face with genuine fear, terror that leaves every part of you shaking like a leaf."

I still was absolutely sure I had no such courage, but since he was clearly offering encouragement, there was little point in continuing to deny it.

"Uh...then I'll do my best," I said, and attempted a Tibetan style bow, putting my hands together and lowering my head. Then I went to borrow a phone. I got in touch with the English Naval Air Service, gave my name, and was forwarded on.

"Jorge Joestar, where the hell are you?" the man on the other end roared, to my surprise. I'd heard this voice before, but it wasn't the officer I usually reported to.

I ignored his question, and asked, "Sorry, but who is this?"

"You know who it is!"

I don't!

"How out of it can the Joestar's only son be?" he roared, and at last I placed the loudmouth. I guess I did know.

"Mister William Cardinal."

"Sir William Cardinal, Mister Joestar."

Fuckkk offfffffffffffffffffff what was this prick doing here?

Sir continued, "As of today I am now the officer in charge of your unit. Answer my question. Where are you and what are you doing. Why did you abandoned an injured companion and run off on your own?"

Hunh? "An injured companion? Who?"

"Mister Jim Graham! Don't try and play dumb!"

Injured? "You mean, Jim's alive?" Even though he'd pulled his tongue and stomach and intestines out and thrown them into the ocean?

"I told you not to play dumb, you coward! Jim Graham told us everything! You encountered three German fighters, surrendered immediately, abandoned Jim when he fell into the sea after shooting down two enemy planes, and left on an enemy ship!?! You thought

Jim was dead so you moved directly to spying for the enemy? Ha! You've got a lot of nerve!"

What the fuck was he on about? We took out all three Albatros fighters, and Jim Graham himself took two of them out!

"Either his memories are confused...or he's deliberately lying," I said. Why would Jim lie? Why would he lie in a way that put me in a tight spot? It made no sense. "No, I doubt he'd be lying. He'd lost his mind a bit, attempted suicide, and was quite badly injured. I can totally see the shock scrambling his memories a bit."

"Suicide? He got scraped up a bit when he crashed into the ocean, but otherwise he's in great shape!"

??? I didn't know what he meant. "Pardon me for suggesting this, but it is your first day on the job; is it possible you have Jim Graham confused with someone else?"

"What!? Are you mocking me!?"

"No, I just...I'll have to talk to Jim when he gets back to the ship."

"No need! Graham's already here! Our planes found him floating in the wreckage of the plane you abandoned! I'll put him on!"

Figuring this was better than having Cardinal shout in my ear any longer, I waiting for Graham to come on the line.

"Jorge Joestar." It was definitely Graham's voice.

"Jim? You're alive?"

"No thanks to you. How could you leave me for dead?"

"....!? What...Jim, what's going on?"

"Shut up! You're a disgrace to the RFC! I'll happily testify to you being a filthy spy!"

"What....!? Hey! I'd never abandon you if you were alive! I genuinely thought you were dead...!"

"You thought I was dead, so you felt free to betray us! Your friends and your country!"

What the fuck....was this not Graham at all? "Who are you?"

"The friend you betrayed and left for dead, Jorge Joestar."

The next time I see you I'll kill you like I would any other god damn Kraut."

"Wait...!"

Click! He hung up on me.

What was going on?

I was still reeling when Lisa Lisa came over, and showed me a photograph. It showed a child with no eyes, and just as I was starting to pat myself on the back for taking such a clear picture, Lisa Lisa said, "You know this boy."

Huh? I froze. "Who?"

I didn't know any eyeless children. But that face did look familiar.

"Did you forget? There's only one Spanish child who really had it in for you."

I was speechless.

"Your old bully, Antonio Torres," Lisa Lisa said. "Real name Anthony Hightower. Seriously, I never imagined that discarded skin lived on as a zombie."

Lisa Lisa went on. "This explains a lot. How did the planes get damaged? The gremlins were hiding on the plane when they took off, or the empty skin caught the wind like a kite or a flying squirrel, flying to the planes. Or, mostly likely, both. It also explains why there were so many reports. Remember, Jorge, his mother abused him so badly his metabolism accelerated until she could peel off his entire skin every year, from his head to his toes, in one single peel."

All cells in the human body are replaced every seven years; but our skin is replaced once a month – and in Antonio

Torres' case, three days before June 16th – Maria's customary skinning day – his skin cell production would speed up.

"If he's kept that power as a skin zombie, and is still growing new skin, then every year, on June 16th, skinning day, Antonio Torres is making copies of himself. The Torres case on La Palma happened in 1900. Fifteen years have passed, fourteen skinning days, and Antonio's copies have all made copies, doubling each time, so 2 to the 14th power, leaving us with 16,384 asshole Antonios. More than enough to terrorize the 800 pilots the Naval Air Service has spread across the channel and the North Sea, wouldn't you say?"

16,384 of that terrifying shitbag Antonio Torres? I damn near toppled over frothing at the mouth.

Lisa Lisa thought for a moment, then said, "Hmm, but from what you said, the stories about these gremlins don't describe them consistently. Some are super short, some had totally different features...only thing they had in common was the holes where the eyes should be."

"?yeah."

"That might mean they weren't actually meeting the real Antonio while out flying, but were making up stories based on the rumors."

".....? How do you mean?"

"When people are uneasy, they see things that aren't there, and not just illusions...they make it actually happen. Their fears manifest, and their plane gets damaged just as they imagined."

"Hunh...? That doesn't seem possible..."

"But it is. I mean, you and I met the same thing."

"? What? When?"

"In the underground temple in Rome. You remember that

monster in the dark?"

The gorilla spider?

Pffffffffffffffffffffffffft.....ffffbbbbbbbtttt...

"I remember."

"But do you think that actually existed?"

"Didn't it?"

"Yes, but I mean was it born naturally into this world? How would something like that evolve?"

"....." Flustered, I remembered. Even then, I'd thought that Lisa Lisa's emotions had summoned the monster. But...

"Nothing like that exists on the surface, and it wasn't something that should exist anywhere in the world. Yet it was there with us, underground."

"Eh...then you believe our imaginations made that thing?"

"No, not just our imaginations. Like my father said, that thing's been in the temple, protecting the treasure all this time. So people must have gone in there after it any number of times. One after another they added to it. Imagining what frightening things might be there in the dark with them, and it matched them, growing into a muscular spider with massive legs."

".....!?" Just remembering that monster was terrifying. It must have been real, after all.

"And if human imagination follows similar patterns, that gorilla spider could exist in any dark place."

You're seriously scaring me now.

But the words got stuck in my throat and before I could beg her to stop Lisa Lisa kept thinking out loud.

"Human fears mingle with their imaginations, and in time

those give birth to actual threats...which explains one other thing. That church on La Palma in 1905, where all those villagers died together. Why? Because villagers who had lived through the Torres case were afraid something like that would happen again, and when they gathered together their fears fed off each other, leading to them all dying together. When scared people gather together, their amplified fear created the Mothman. But he didn't actually manifest. He was simply drawn on the walls of that locked room. As the last job of those who were dying."

My consciousness blurred as I remembered those horrifying drawings, scribbled with the ash and blood of bodies as they burned. Lisa Lisa's voice grew faint, sounding far away. "Humans have only just learned to fly. But now that they've created gremlins, I suppose from now on, any time scared people are flying they'll be attacked by an eyeless Antonio Torres. Ah ha ha. Amazing."

I fainted.

Chapter 12
Rhinoceros Beetle

カブト虫

When I told him Joseph Joestar had died of cancer two years ago, Cars said, "Oh... Luck always was on his side."

"If he was still alive, would you have sought revenge?" I asked. "He'd be an old man, nearly a hundred years old."

"I would indeed. After all, the man sent me into space thirty-seven times. I won't feel freed from that fate until things are settled between us. I've spent nigh eternity dreaming of placing a stone mask on that man, turning him into a vampire, having him devour other humans, and finally eating him myself."

".....? Stone mask?"

"A tool that turns humans into a good source of energy and nutrition. Mere humans are hardly enough to satisfy our appetites. Turning them into vampires makes them far more appetizing, and drinking blood makes them young again, and much stronger. I'm sure Joseph Joestar would make a pleasingly delicious vampire."

Desperately trying to look calm, I listened to Cars' terrifying story...my mind reeling. A stone mask? That turned humans into vampires? Was that even possible?

"Humans are a life form with possibilities," Cars said. "You can do almost anything if you simply tweak their brains a little. Changes to the brain change the electric currents. If the electric signals change, the blood changes. If the blood changes the bones and organs and skin and all the rest changes. Jorge Joestar, you are quite lacking in height compared to Joseph."

Lacking!? I wasn't lacking! Certainly I was shorter than my grandfather, who was over 190 centimeters, but I was taller than the average Japanese man. As I thought this, Cars reached his hand out to my head. I froze, and his fingers slipped into my head, as easily as an airplane slips into a cloud.

"Eeeek!" I squealed, but I was afraid I'd die if I moved so I had to stay perfectly still.

"Don't worry, the brain has no capacity for pain," Cars said,

and pulled his fingers out of my head, leaving no holes or any sign he'd reached inside me. Just as I was starting to feel relieved a weird sound came from my throat and my head snapped sideways of its own accord and I thought maybe that sound wasn't me swallowing but my neck breaking and then snap crunchn craaack all the bones in my body started twisting in all sorts of crazy directions, one after the other. But it only looked horrible. I could feel the vibrations running through me, but no pain. My knees and elbows bent backwards and my wrists spun the wrong way and it seemed obvious all my bones were breaking but apparently they weren't and I was fine.

And I was about twenty centimeters taller. ".....!?"

"See? I know the human brain," Cars said. "I can also make wings grow from your back."

He started to reach his hand out again but I ducked under it. "I'm fine!"

"Heh heh heh. Humans are a fascinating species. They seem like they are constantly striving to become something else, but they resist actual change. Most likely they simply enjoy imagining things. That is what I like most about the human race. They are the only ones who imagine, who create. Who make stories. When I was living underground I gathered the stories human had written, and read them. Humans are the only species that enjoy things that happen to others of their kind. At first I had no idea how they were enjoying it. Our brains had no concept of emotional investment, of putting ourselves in other's shoes. It wasn't easy to do. My race was complete as it was, and satisfied with that. And as a result they lacked ambition, made no progress of any kind, and lived a life of stagnation. But there's a difference between being actually sufficient and simply not knowing that something is insufficient. I came to understand that we weren't perfect. We just hadn't noticed that we weren't. We lacked even the ability to realize this

fact because we had never compared ourselves to anyone else. Because we expected nothing from anyone else, and made do entirely with what we already had. But I noticed. Reading human writings and learning to enjoy them sent new electric impulses through my mind. I knew then that we had never stopped to think about our own potential. We were certain our species was the pinnacle of all things, and thus we had stopped progressing. This was the first time I ever felt dissatisfied. The first time I had ever questioned myself. That quickly led to frustration, to anger. And that frustration and anger pleased me. It was what you would call a eureka moment. I was furious with myself, and that was cause for celebration. It was proof that I, too, had potential."

"And looking back, I was baffled by how I had ever lived without doubt, without dissatisfaction. We could never set foot in the light of the sun, could never know the world above during the day. We were trapped in the world underground. I couldn't bear it any longer. So I quickly began exploring my own potential. My own brain. Everything begins with the brain. To study our brains I began killing my own kind like we killed humans. I killed them, split open their heads, and examined their brains; as I suspected, we had potential. In order to investigate closer, further, and with more certainty, I killed a great many more, but murder itself did not really pose a problem among my kind. After all, none of them cared for anyone but themselves. Sometimes I even killed in front of others of my kind, but nobody said anything. They had no emotional investment, no imagination, and I slowly realized just how appalling that was. If someone attempted to attack us, to conquer us, and we reacted with such disinterest, that could be the end of us. We would be annihilated by our own self-satisfaction and arrogance. Fearing for my own safety, I continued

my studies, created the stone mask, stretched my brain, and conquered the sun. And not only that. I created a perfect body for myself, one superior to all other living things."

"Hunh...so? How is not dying?"

"...there's such a lot of time."

The question I'd asked absently hit directly to the heart of things, and Cars' whispered response had an air of such grim realism that I almost started laughing, but he was watching me suspiciously. Whoops. If he thought I was mocking him, he might get angry, and in such close quarters...well, it was about three times the size of the H. G. Wells, but there was so still nowhere to run, and I had no hope of standing against him.

Hokay, I thought. Was it acceptable to allow this Ultimate Cars to reach Earth six months from now?

Of course not. After all, he ate humans. He also turned them into vampires, but either way he was clearly the enemy of mankind.

Sure, there wasn't a rule that humans shouldn't have any predators...yet at a human faced with such a threat, I felt obligated to do what I could. But this predator was immortal, so I couldn't just kill him. Could I somehow blow up the ship? No. He was smart enough to take the Giotto's apart and build them into this ship in the blink of an eye. We didn't have any powerful explosives at hand, and even if we blew it up with Narancia's Das Boot, Cars would just kill Narancia the moment he realized what we were doing, and his Stand would vanish. As the thought crossed my mind there was a sonar ping from inside me. Narancia's Das Boot had snuck inside my body again, without Cars noticing.

458 I glanced at Narancia. The boy's eyes were totally those of a mafia veteran. He was going to try something before he got eaten. With Das Boot? It could only move inside living tissue and Stands. Wait...part of this ship was made from the extra Cars. He could

move through that. That must be how he got his submarine inside me without touching me. What else could he do?

But before I could think of anything else, Cars said, "What's this?"

I looked over, and Cars had his hand inserted into his own chest. He felt around inside himself, then pulled his hand out with one of Narancia's submarines held in it. "Is this...a machine? Has human technology created boats that can go inside the body?"

Oh, shit, I thought. Neither Narancia or I had even begun to understand how ultimate the Ultimate Thing really was. As if proving that, Cars sat down on the floor, and took Das Boot apart as we watched. His fingers moved with such unhesitating precision it was as if he had built it himself. First he heated the tips of his fingers like a blow torch, making a line across the outer walls, and after peeling them off he divided it into engineering sections, living quarters, control rooms, and missile storage. Tiny hands had come out of the tips of his fingers, and were turning and opening every nut and screw, leaving the entire plumbing system intact. It was like he stroked it and everything divided itself into pieces, lined up in neat rows on the floor, down to the individual spoons in the kitchen or the springs in the beds. When it came to the monitors in the control room or the computers in engineering, he not only took them apart, he also analyzed the structure. "Some sort of visual data," he muttered, putting the computer back together. He plugged the cord into the palm of his hand and opened his mouth. A beam of light emerged from the back of his throat, and a thin membrane appeared between his jaws, turning his mouth into a projector. The information flowing from his palm was transferred to a thin cellophane-like paper, and projected onto the wall across from him.

It was a sexy photo of a naked woman.

"Eh!? Hey! Aughhh!" Narancia shrieked, turning bright red.

"Stoooooop! Stop it! What the fuck!? God damn it!"

He was in such a tizzy he forgot all about shame and fear and threw himself at Cars, trying to cover up the projector lens, but Cars easily lifted him, spun him around in the air, placed him flat on his back on the ceiling, and tied him there with cords and pipes. Below him, Cars kept on projecting. Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. With an analog sound like an old slide projector, image after image displayed, every single one of the same naked girl. "I said stop! Yo! This is morally wrong, damn it! Please, Mr. Cars! I really fucking mean it! Aiiieeeee!" Narancia was so worked up now his nose had started bleeding, dripping down from the ceiling. I was definitely starting to feel sorry for him.

"Cars, these might be personal memories. It's not the best manners to display someone's precious..." and no sooner had the words left my mouth then the next picture showed that girl on the cover of a magazine. "Hunh?" Wait, these were all pin-ups?

"Auuuuughhhhhh! How dare you!? My Trish Cicciolina!" Narancia screamed. Now I placed her. Trish Cicciolina was a famous porn star who'd become a member of the Italian Parliament. She was famous even in Japan. She was middle-aged now, but these were all from when she was young.

I glanced up, accidentally meeting Narancia's eye. "What, motherfucker? You'd better not tell anyone about this or I swear I'll fucking kill you! Let me down, Cars! Fuck! I get free of this I'll kill all of you!" he screamed, spraying spit and nose blood. "You can like whoever you want," I said, weakly. This did not appear to comfort him at all. "Shut up!" he roared. "Shut the fuck up! Fuck you all!" He then began trying to spit at me.

I dodged, laughing. What the hell were we even doing?

Cars turned his mouth projector back into his normal mouth, and said, "So this machine has come from inside your body? Have human bodies become capable of making machines?"

"Die, Cars!" Narancia yelled, now just spitting furiously in all directions. Cars ignored this completely. He stood up, and reached his hand towards Narancia's belly. Afraid he'd die if Cars dissected him looking for the factory, I hastily yelled, "No, Cars! It exists as a machine, but is something else entirely."

Cars stopped his hand, and looked at me. ".....? What do you mean?"

"It's called a Stand. It takes the form of a machine, but isn't one. I only just learned about them today myself, but Stands are... something ordinary humans don't have. A special power. Like telekinesis or telepathy, or psychic powers. But much more varied and complex. They can look like people, animals, plants, or machines. Only people who have Stands can see them or touch them. I just happen to have found someone who made it so I could see and touch Stands, but I'm not a Stand Master myself."

"Then I can use Stands, too?"

"Well...I'm guessing you can see and touch them because you're the ultimate lifeform..." I trailed off as Cars held his palm up in front of his chest, and a submarine surfaced from inside him. It was a different design from Narancia's Das Boot.

".....!" I looked up at the ceiling, and Narancia appeared to be shocked speechless. Cars had just spontaneously developed a Stand.

"Hmm," Cars said, staring at his Stand. "I understand now."

Whoops. We were fucked now, I thought. Everything was possible for the ultimate being. He could absorb anything, without limits.

"Since it's my own power, I can easily grasp what it can do," Cars said, and boooooooooommm an explosive sound echoed through every inch of my body. It was so loud I covered my ears but since the noise was inside me I couldn't block the sound. "It seems you really don't have a Stand," Cars said, and I was relieved

my ear drums had survived what I suddenly realized was an extremely loud sonar. My ears were still ringing. This was nuts.

"Unh...!" I turned towards the groan, and saw Enrico Pucci writhing on the floor, clutching his hands to his ears, his face screwed up in pain. He must be getting the deafening sonar treatment, too.

"Hmm, there is something in you," Cars said, striding over to him. Despite his injuries, Pucci tried to scramble away, but was moving too slowly, and there was nowhere to go.

"Unh...no..." Cars ignored his hoarse pleas, bent over, and stuck his arm in Pucci's back. "Auughhh!" Pucci screamed, and Cars began dragging a humanoid Stand about the same size as Pucci out of his back by the neck.

"Hmm," Cars said, examining it. "This looks like a man, but is no man...nor any animal...what is it...? Why are there letters written all over the surface of its skin?"

"Gah...shit...shut up! Do it, White Snake!" Pucci yelled. His Stand turned and punched Cars in the cheek. Cars' head rolled sideways with the blow, and a disc popped out of his head, but not one or two, but a flood of them, bubbling out of his head, spilling ceaselessly onto the floor.

Pucci froze to the spot, horrified.

Even as more discs poured out of him, Cars turned back to Pucci, and said, "So this...is your Stand's power. Fascinating. I understand it."

Hunh!?

Before I even had time to be surprised, a humanoid Stand emerged from Cars' back. It looked something like Pucci's White Snake, but it was bigger, and had three heads and six arms like a statue of Ashura. The middle arm on the right punched Pucci's face, and two discs came out. Cars looks mildly surprised. ".....? Only two...?" Discs were still spilling out of his own head with no

signs of ever slowing down. They were forming quite the pile.

"Let's see..." Cars picked up one of Pucci's discs, and placed it inside his own forehead. "...I see, White Snake. A stand that can turn memories and Stand powers into discs and steal them, and control people by writing to the discs..." he said, once he'd finished reading Pucci's Stand disc. "Stop, please..." Pucci said.

"How did you get this power," Cars asked. "Were you stabbed by a special arrow? Long ago, when I was on Earth, there were occasional people with special powers, and I made a tool that could pull those powers out of humans, a bow and arrow. I barely used it before I began slaughtering my own species. In theory, that bow and arrow can trigger a reaction; to protect their own lives from the fatal wound, their talents would blossom, the energy would heal the wounds, and they would discover special abilities previously hidden within them. Has something like that pulled this Stand out of you?"

Without waiting for Pucci to answer, Cars pulled the memory disc out of him, knocking him out, and placed it in his own head. "...hmm...it seems my bow and arrow was not involved, but the theory is not wrong. 'The Devil's Palm'...while the body hangs between life and death only those with a Stand lurking within them will be saved."

I had heard the legends of 'The Devil's Palm'. A holy spot somewhere in America, that moved itself from place to place, and those that wandered into it were either chosen, or died.

Cars sighed. "But everything else is quite dull. There is nothing to be learned from human memories. They lack attention to detail, their thought patterns are shallow, and their recall is shockingly poor..." He reached up to pull the disc out. "Mm?" he said, pausing. "What...?"

Then he took the disc out, slammed it back in Pucci's head, glanced at me, and laughed.

"Thanks to him, six months will take four hours. Aren't you lucky?" Hunh? We both gaped at him, but he turned his attention back to Pucci, who had woken up again. "You there. I did not write a message on the outside of Giotto, and did not throw it down to Earth. Think on that. Who prepared the metal plate that killed your family?"

Hunh? HUUUNHH?what!?

We'd all assumed the notes about the way to heaven had led us to the back of Mars, where we found the Giotto's and Cars, and all of us, myself included, had assumed that was key to finding this 'Heaven', so this revelation threw me for a loop. But who else could have prepared that metal sheet with a message on it? Who had dropped that from the sky onto Pucci's house, and how? They hadn't just dropped it on his house, they'd wiped it from the face of the Earth.

Pucci's home had vanished, replaced by a crater seventeen meters in diameter.

Who else could do that?

"Think about it," Cars said. "If I could throw a metal plate down to Earth, I'd have flown there myself. This is impossible. Even if the metal is treated to be heat resistant, there's no possible way a single metal plate could survive all the way from space to the surface without burning up. I know everything about the Giotto's heat shields. No matter what angle it entered the atmosphere, it would melt in the stratosphere. To begin with, they've obviously only applied the heat resistant treatment to the outside. The back of the plate is ordinary metal, and would melt away first. And they've even carved letters into the front of it. That would ruin whatever effect the treatment had. Why is it humans choose to blind themselves the moment things cease to make sense? Why

can't you stop yourselves from being so stupid you ignored the facts that don't fit with your desire to believe this was a message from space?"

But the strangest part was, nobody had noticed the meteor falling. The meteor had evaded both the Space Center and the Air Force radar.

Funnier Valentine had mentioned that. That should have caught my attention. It was more than just 'strange'.

But looking things over again, how could throwing an iron plate leave a seventeen meter crater? That seemed unlikely if it hadn't been traveling as fast as it would have if it was coming from outer space. But that's only if it was thrown normally. What if it wasn't thrown normally?

Thrown by someone not normal using a not normal throwing technique.

"Come, now! Remember the sky!" Cars said, annoyed by Pucci's silence. "Even with your pathetically low recall, you should be able to managed that much! Remember him!"

".....?" When Pucci just gaped at him, Cars spat, "Look," and turned his mouth into a projector again, beaming an image onto the wall.

Ka-chunk. The evening sky, orange and purple mingled. A single dot against it.

Ka-chunk. That dot enlarged, clearly human shaped.

Ka-chunk. The humanoid form enlarged, but with the sun at his back his face and figure were in shadow, impossible to make out.

Ka-chunk. The contrast adjusted, illuminating everything. The man floating in the air was muscular, with long limbs and a barrel chest, even features twisted in a wicked grin.

I knew that man.

No, I didn't.

I don't know why I thought I did.

He was white, and looked like no one I'd ever seen. Long, narrow eyes, a strong jaw, full lips, and three moles on his left ear. He was handsome, but there was something inherently evil about his face. His smile let us catch a glimpse of two long, sharp fangs. He didn't seem like a Stand Master...he didn't even seem like a human.

The image on the wall vanished, and Cars laughed. "He's a vampire. What could my food source be plotting, sending me a spaceship and Joseph Joestar's grandson?"

"Eh? I'm adopted. Not actually related to Joseph at all." And it wasn't this mysterious vampire who put me on the H. G. Wells, but Tsukumojuku. When I said so, Cars' White Snake appeared in front of me, fist clenched. Oh. He's going to hit me, I thought. But I didn't even have time to brace myself.

Wham! Not only did my face turn, but my whole body followed it, and I went spinning through the air. He hit me so hard it's a wonder my neck didn't break. It was probably a good thing I didn't brace myself; going limp probably saved me.

"I'd better check your memories, too..." Cars said. White Snake pulled the disc out of my head, and slotted it into Cars'. His relaxed tone belied the sheer force he'd used, but I lacked the energy to argue that point. My cheekbone appeared to be broken, and I couldn't touch it, and it was already super swollen. Both my shoulders were still injured, so I was pretty much hurting all over.

I tried to squeeze the throbbing pain out of my mind and

wonder why Tsukumojuku had sent me to Mars in the first place. **Hey! I am your instrument. A person needs your help. I'll take you to them.** That's all he'd said, but I still hadn't done anything here. All I'd done was meet Cars, and it sounds like he and Joseph Joestar had a history, but Cars couldn't be the person who needed my help. He wasn't a person...

I thought that far, then I shook my head. Actually, my cheek hurt too much to shake, so I just did it in my mind.

The reason I'd done nothing wasn't because the person who needed me wasn't here. I hadn't done anything because I hadn't tried to do anything. If I actually accomplished something then that would be useful to whoever it was who needed me. The journey Tsukumojuku had given wasn't over yet. And it seemed like this space trip might actually finish within the four hours we'd been given. I had no idea why.

"Uh, Cars-sempai," I said. The blood in my mouth made a gross sound and I nearly started coughing on it but managed to stop myself and say again, "Cars-sempai, sorry, um...can you heal me up? My body and head hurt so much I can't think straight."

Cars didn't respond at all, so for a moment, just a moment, I managed to trick myself into turning to look at him. Even that slight movement felt like someone took a long harpoon and jammed it into my cheek and through my brain with such force it wound up sticking two meters out the other side and the pain of it left my vision blurry but I managed to recover and see Cars enjoying my memories. He was just staring at empty space, but I think he was enjoying my colorful life.

"Yo, Carsy, don't ignore me!"

Cars' eyes suddenly focused on me, and he grinned. "You sure waste a lot of time on stupid puzzles."

Nah, they might look simple from the results and solutions but that was just the Egg of Columbus and actually getting there

was pretty dang hard. I would have argued that point all day but simply couldn't right now. "I'd like to think faster so if you could just heal me..."

"In the end, you're just another human," Cars said, ignoring me again. "You see a mystery and think, 'How odd!' and put it on a shelf somewhere."

Shuddup. "Even if I put things together after the fact, as long as I get there in the end, what does it matter? If I stopped to ponder every mystery I saw before collecting all the information I needed, I'd never solve anything..." I managed to spit out, but was there any point in arguing advanced detecting with the ultimate thing?

But to my surprise, Cars just said, "Hmm...makes sense," and then noticed my condition. "Mm? You can still think like that even without your memory disc? This isn't something learned through experience, but a creation of your innate intelligence? I see why they call you the 'deduction machine.'"

I had a lot of ideas about where he'd pulled that from my memories but that was an insult critics of the detective novel genre used to dismiss the presence of the detective character...but that didn't god damn matter so I summoned the last bit of energy I had and spit out, "Heal...me..." and at last Cars heard me.

"Heal you? Human healing is far too weak, and takes far too much time," he said, coming over and crouching down next to me, leaving my disc stuck in his head. "Remember this! The heal button is right here," he said, and stuck his fingers just to the left of the crown of my head but I couldn't actually see him doing this and I couldn't stick my fingers in my own brain anyway. Then my brain went bam and suddenly inflated, then squeezed itself tight like it was pumping something downwards and first the swelling on my cheek got way larger and the bones started making scraping sounds like they were rubbing against each other and the skin on

my cheek came back and the swelling was gone and my bones moved back to normal and everything was slim again. My cheek was healed in an instant and then the swelling went down to my shoulders. Bam! Both shoulders went giant and round and the wounds yawned open but didn't hurt and didn't bleed. Pfffft a sort of wind came out of my body and when that stopped the wounds were closed and the swelling went down and my flesh and muscles and bones were all connected right like they'd always been. After healing my shoulders the swelling went all the way down the rest of my body like it was looking for other wounds and injuries to heal and finally ended up at my ass where it came out like a fart, pbbbt. I yelped, embarrassed, and jumped to my feet but my body was entirely back to normal, and I felt better than I had in years except that I was still too tall.

"Cars, sorry, but can you put me back at my old height?"

"?isn't the view better?"

Tch! "It wasn't bad to begin with, and my clothes don't fit any more, so I look like shit!"

"You can always change your clothes."

Says the half-naked man. But I didn't say that, and Cars reached out and stuck his hand in my brain again, and a moment later snap crunch craack my bones all broke the opposite direction from before and then I was my old height again. Mm, good. I felt like my head was a little larger than normal but it had always been on the big side.

"OK," I said. Time to think. "Cars, can I have the disc back?"

"It's more effective if I look at it."

Gah. "But they're my memories," I said, and since a third of the disc was sticking out of Cars head I grabbed it and yanked it out. I was getting pretty bold. If he was gonna kill me it'd be over in an instant and that instant was always hovering over me and I had no way of predicting what would cause that instant to arrive so I

just didn't give a shit any more. Even after he healed my wounds I couldn't exactly relax, here.

But as I was putting the disc back in my head Cars said, "I already found him."

"? Who?"

"That vampire."

"....eh? Where? In my memories?"

"Yes."

Really!?

"So I've met that vampire before?"

"No. You simply saw a photo of him."

"Hunh...?"

"When you were seven, you were looking at an album of old photographs in the Joestar home, and it momentarily entered your field of vision."

How the fuck was I supposed to remember that? I didn't even remember the album!

Cars laughed at my dumbfounded expression. "Heh heh, like I said, your memories are more useful when I view them."

Then Cars turned his mouth into a projector again and displayed my memory on the wall.

Ka-chunk. A page of an album filled with black and white photographs.

Ka-chunk. A close up of the largest photo on the page. It was apparently a picture from when the Joestars were living in America. It was a big house, with what looked like a large farmland outside. Three well dressed men were lined up outside the house. The middle-aged man in the center was sitting on a chair, and two boys stood behind him. All three were smiling.

Ka-chunk. A close up of the boy on the left. Light colored hair, that looks soft to the touch. Long, narrow eyes, a sturdy chin, and full lips.

Him.

He had a pleasant expression, and he was still young, not fully grown, of a much slighter build, but it was clearly the same person who we'd seen floating in the air looking evil as shit.

Ka-chunk. The whole photograph displayed again. This time it also showed the note written under the photograph. A caption, written in English, that read, "1881, Joestar Estate." And three names, arranged in an upside-down triangle to match the positions of the three men. The middle-aged man in the chair was George Joestar. The boy standing on his right was Jonathan Joestar. And the boy in question was labeled Dio Brando.

Dio Brando.

When I saw that name it felt like a bolt of lightning ran down my back.

1881?

That was 131 years ago. Jonathan was my great-great grandfather, Joseph's grandfather. Joseph had apparently not got on well with his own father, Jodoh Joestar. (Who was, apparently, a gloomy man of few words; it was hard to tell what he was thinking; the exact opposite of Joseph, who, for better or for worse, was always bullshit free.) But he often mentioned his grandfather with something approaching reverence. A gentleman, kind-hearted, handsome, and so athletic he played rugby with the young men until quite late in life. If he was with Jonathan as a boy, this bearded man in the chair, George Joestar, was most likely his father, the Jojo of six generations before me (albeit, of no blood relation.)

Another George Joestar, I thought, and remembered what Tsukumojuku had said.

In my world there is another Jorge Joestar.

Had Tsukumojuku's friend been this middle-aged George? No, that didn't fit. Tsukumoku had claimed to be from a world where it was July 23rd, 1904, twenty-three years after this picture was taken...or even more. The world he'd come from had a completely different map. A hundred years was not enough time for all the continents to fuse together.

...or was it?

Look at what was happening to Morioh and Nero Nero Island. Sprouting six legs like that...would hardly be enough, I guess, but was it really out of the question that all the continents had moved that quickly, and made the world we lived in? And that world history had chosen to keep that fact a secret?

Wait, wait, I thought.

I already knew that I didn't need to think in terms of the history I was living in. I looked at Cars.

This Cars was the original Cars. Because he was the ultimate thing, he'd failed to die as the universe ended, and had gone through the beginning and end of the universe thirty-six times, collecting another thirty-six extra Cars and thirty-seven Giotto space probes.

So the world was repeating history in a very similar fashion. Was this what the philosopher Nietzsche had named the Eternal Recurrence? The concept of history repeating itself occurring in actual fact over a substantially larger time span.

Then it made far more sense to assume that Tsukumojuku had come from a world in one of the previous thirty-six universes, and the discrepancies in the world map had been caused by the accumulated effects of minor differences in the way history unfolded. OK. So the Jorge Joestar Tsukumojuku had been friends with was a Jorge Joestar from one of those previous universes. And if Tsukumokuju was right and that Jorge had spelled his name Jorge than differences in my own time line had led to that name being

applied six generations later...to the Japanese boy adopted into the Joestar family. Me. Although my name was still officially spelled Joji.

That seemed a bit forced. I mean, I was adopted, I thought. Similarities or differences might arise within history, but that was always within the Joestar bloodline. None of that had anything to do with an adopted son.

But anyway, Dio Brando. I knew nothing about him at all.

"Cars, do you know what connection this Dio Brando has with the Joestar family?" I was a detective, yet here I was asking someone else about my own memories. Oh well. Maybe I wasn't a great detective. Given the current course of events it seemed unlikely I would ever end up gathering everyone connected to the place in one location and explaining my solution to them.

Oblivious to my internal shame, Cars simply answered the question. "He was adopted by the Joestar family. As Dio Joestar, he died in a train accident in 1889."

Adopted!? Just like me...!?

Cars mouth turned into a projector again, showing us. Ka-chunk. This time the picture moved, and Car's ear turned into a speaker so we could hear. I hadn't heard Grandpa Joseph's voice in a while. I was a fidgety child, and the image rarely focused on him for long. I wasn't interested in his story. It was his bedroom, and I was setting on Joseph Joestar's bed. He said, "My grandfather Jonathan was a hero. He died trying to stop his adopted brother from robbing a train. D was an even bigger piece of shit than my father. If they hadn't taken each other out, I'm sure Jonathan would have raised my father properly, and he'd have made this family even greater than we are."

D must be Dio Brando, so detested Joseph refused to even say his name aloud. But a train robbery? The Joestars were titled aristocrats, wealthy even by the standards of English citizens. What

the hell happened? I can see why the Joestars would want to keep this history secret. But if he'd really died then, he couldn't have been there in the sky over Cape Canaveral in July, 1999, throwing a metal plate from the Giotto space probe at Pucci's house.

When had Dio Brando become a vampire? Once you'd become a vampire you could hardly live in polite society. Then again, the kind of man who'd plan a train robbery probably didn't give a shit about polite society. "Cars, you conquered sunlight, using the stone mask with the Aja Red Stone slotted into it, right? Are vampires also weak to sunlight?"

Shifting his mouth back to normal, Cars replied, "Of course. Vampires can't last a second in sunlight. We...the species I once belonged to could operate for a brief period of time in sunlight, and could turn our bodies to soil or metal or burrow into rock and survive partial exposure to sunlight. I assume you're thinking about Dio Brando?"

".....!? Yes, but..."

"Vampires have power humans can only dream of. They can heal very quickly, have heightened senses and physical strength, but they don't have wings. They can't fly. But in the photo, he was hovering in the air without wings. In 1999, this Pucci fellow had not yet discovered his Stand, and thus could not see it, but this vampire almost certainly has a Stand. Or some similar power."

Yeah. And a vampire with that kind of power had waited a hundred years to put some massive scheme in motion. Making a fake Way to Heaven to get Pucci moving, sending him to Mars, all to lead Cars, the ultimate thing, back to Earth.

Hmm?

Wait, I thought, and glanced at Cars, who was grinning at me.

"Heh heh heh, it seems this lowly vampire has the nerve to take a run at me. He must be very confident in his Stand's ability. I

supposed it was a stroke of luck that the astronauts who came to Mars were Stand Masters. That allowed me to learn about Stands before returning to Earth. It appears Stand powers can ignore the laws of physics, so he might have been able to drop me in a trap I could never have expected...he could perhaps have sent me out into space again without even touching me. But now I'm ready for him. When we reach Earth, I'll begin by conquering all Stand Masters," Cars said, clearly enjoying himself. I remembered what Kishibe Rohan had said.

Stand Masters find themselves drawn to one another, like a magnetic attraction.

I already knew of one place with a great number of Stand Masters. It was floating in the middle of The Ocean. Morioh and Nero Nero Island. The two of them were currently overlapping, and the two islands were surrounded by the American army.

He said if nothing changes, the American army will flip the island!

The message given to Hirose Kouji. Why was America trying to eliminate Morioh? Did America somehow know that the ship with Cars on it wouldn't be landing there in six months, but in four hours?

The commander in chief of the American army was the President, The Funniest Valentine. His father, Funnier, had just tried to kill all the other astronauts on the dark side of Mars. That

was clearly part of a strategy to grab Cars for their own devices. Had the H. G. Wells blowing up been scripted, and the plan been for Funnier to be like we were now, on a ship with Cars, quietly returned to Earth without the other nations knowing? If Funny Valentine had given Hirose that message because either he was in on his son and grandson's plan, or because he disagreed with it, that made a lot more sense. Mm, I was sure of it.

America knew Cars was coming. They might not yet know that Funnier had been blown up by Narancia on Mars, and might believe it was him on board this ship with Cars, but the army was waiting for this ship to land on Earth. And since he was the ultimate thing, it was safe to assume they would be well prepared; a Stand Master like Funnier might survive it, but an ordinary citizen like me could easily die in the chaos. Crap. I ran over to Narancia, who was still bound to the ceiling, and grabbed the pebble phone out of his back pocket. I hit redial. Tomemememem. Tomemem. At last Shiobana Haruno answered, "Yes?"

"Hello," I said, in Japanese. "This is Jorge Joestar."

"Oh. What is it?"

"I was wondering what's going on down there."

"I see. Good timing. I needed to call you myself."

"Did you find Diavolo?"

"No. About the state of affairs here...an hour ago the American army ordered us to leave these waters. Thirty minutes ago they gave us a final warning. And a moment ago an American air force scout plane inexplicably broke apart in the sky over Morioh, and crashed. Villagers went out to rescue them, clashed with Naval forces, and are now fighting. We expect they'll start bombing Morioh and Nero Nero Island any moment, so we've ordered all civilians from both islands to hide underneath Nero Nero Island. But we still haven't figured out how to control Nero Nero Island, so if it starts moving across Morioh again, everyone

will have to move along with it. Not ideal, but our best available option. We are continuing the hunt for this serial killer, Kira Yoshikage, but no likely suspects have been found, and once America attacks the chaos will make continued investigation nigh impossible."

He rattled this all off calmly, but whaaat? Fighting? Villagers and the navy!? Only Stand Masters stood any chance of fighting the navy, but even then people without Stands the world over would see the American soldiers aiming their guns at unarmed Japanese citizens. How was the international community allowing this? Bombing? The American attack? How was any of this insane crap happening? I could only assume all of this was being kept secret from the world at large.

As if he'd guessed my reaction, Shiobana added, "They've told everyone that terrorists have taken over Morioh and Nero Nero Island, and that the villagers have been driven mad with a weaponized virus, and the terrorists made them attack the Japanese and American soldiers who came to rescue them.

".....!?"

"There are actual reports of patients in Sardinia and the Touhoku region of Japan going berserk and attacking people. Their symptoms are contagious, and the number of victims is rising. It's like a zombie movie. The dead bite people, and those bit or who come in contact with their saliva turn and attack other humans. I suppose the key difference from the movies is that there are rumors of flying zombies. At any rate, the world is in a state of panic, and everyone believes that Morioh and Nero Nero Island are the source of the epidemic. They've been told the islands set out into The Ocean so they can carry the zombie disease to other lands, and an international emergency safety council meeting is

being held to decide the fate of these two islands. Satellite weapons are already arranged above us, and we believe they'll be used to blow these islands away. We have to figure out a way to control these islands before that happens."

I don't even...zombies? Flying zombies? Since when did things like that exist!?

When I said nothing, Shiobana asked, "By the way, where are you and Narancia?"

"Eh? Uh...outer space."

".....? Could you put Narancia on?"

"Oh, sure," I said, and handed the pebble phone up to Narancia, who immediately wailed, "Giornoouooooo, it's me! God damn it, listen!" And with tears running down his cheeks he began explaining everything that had happened. I staggered a few steps away, and saw Cars grinning at me.

"It's possible the Stand Masters you want to conquer are about to be wiped out?" I said.

Although that might well not happen. Stand powers were pretty amazing, after all. They might well be able to withstand the American army's attack.

But I was worried.

Cars chuckled, "If you're worried, then you'd better save them."

Could he read my mind, too? "If I could do that this would all be easy."

"Have you actually thought to see if there's anything you can do? Human minds moves so slowly, and you lack perseverance. Always giving up so easily."

What...!? I wasn't a Stand Master, I was an ordinary human! I opened my mouth to say as much, but thought better of it. Cars wouldn't say something like that unless he already had an answer in mind. In other words, Cars knew there was something I could

do. There was something I could do, I just hadn't noticed yet.

I would if I thought about it. If my reason for being helpless was that I was an ordinary human then I needed to do something about that. I had just meant I wasn't the ultimate thing or a Stand Master, but I just had to change that.

I could change that.

Behind Cars, Enrico Pucci was lying on the floor, still badly hurt, and breathing ragged. He was glowering at outer space, deep in thought. His Stand. White Snake. Two Discs. It could take out a Stand power. The same as reading the memory discs, if you stuck a Stand disc in your head, then would that make me able to use the Stand just like we'd been reading memories? "Cars," I said, "Can I borrow the disc of your Stand power?"

Cars laughed out loud. "Ha ha ha, bold move, Jorge Joestar. I thought you were going to ask for my help, but you'd prefer to do something yourself."

Eh? Oh, was that all? If he was willing to do it for me then by all means, but Cars' Ashura White Snake was already out, and pulling two discs out of Cars' head. White Snake and Das Boot. But White Snake was still standing behind Cars. Hunh? I thought. "It's a copy," Cars said.

He really could do anything, I thought, and took the discs from him. I shoved one of them into my head.

As I did, Cars said, "But can a mere human use my power?" Oh shit, I thought, and everything went black. I'd exploded.

I had literally exploded, and there were still bits of gore dripping off the ship walls, and Narancia on the ceiling and Pucci on the floor were both gaping at me, covered in blood. But my body was back to normal, totally uninjured. Cars was still laughing. "You really don't think things through," he said. The discs were in

his hand, so he must have taken them out of my head. But he put my body back together before I died. I guess the ultimate thing viewed me as sort of a flesh doll made of bits of bone and blood that he could easily put back together again if anything happened. I was rather grateful he'd let me survive my careless death.

"Thanks, Cars. ...can I ask how? I'm pretty sure I was totally dead there."

"Flesh is a vessel, and the soul is like ice cream made inside. If the vessel breaks, the soul momentarily retains its form. I merely reassembled the vessel before the soul melted away."

"Ha ha...I think we just casually answered the question, "What is life?""

"That was never a question."

"...okay...but was my ice cream ok? Didn't spill any?"

"I do not fail. And I've already removed the thirty-six souls from the extra mes, so I have experience. But my experience also tells me that you've already died a number of times."

"Hunh?"

"If we extend the ice cream analogy, if you melt ice cream and refreeze it, it doesn't quite taste the same as it did. The texture changes. Understood?"

"Yeah..."

"It's exactly like that."

"So I felt like I was dying? Several different times?"

"Hmm. And your emotional reaction to that damages your soul. I suppose it's possible."

"When you turned the extra Cars into fuel and ship parts, did their feelings damage their souls?"

"I sensed nothing like that. The extra mes gave me their lives, and I simply took them."

"Oh...ok. There's no point in arguing amongst yourselves?"

"We are the ultimate thing, and there is no discord among

us. We all understand everything. And I did not throw out the souls I removed. They now form a part of me."

"...did you lick them like ice cream, eating them?"

"The ice cream is a metaphor, fool. Are you really human? What happened to your ability to make sense of things?"

"Ha ha, you sure are smart, Boss Cars."

"You are merely far too stupid. I can't believe you're descended from that crafty Joseph Joestar."

Well, I am adopted. But I let that be. Grandpa Joseph had definitely taught me a lot. I'd grown up in the Joestar household. So this was pathetic. I was supposed to be a detective, but he kept saying I wasn't thinking enough and was being far too stupid and he was absolutely right about it.

My mind was starting to clear.

"I have to do better," I said, mostly to myself. Blood was pumping through my brain. "I'm Jorge Joestar. The Detective Jojo."

So I had to think, damn it! The situation was so oppressive my brain was withering and not working properly. Do your job, brain! Everything about this mess was beyond anything I'd previously experienced. But I'd been surprised by all kinds of things before, but I'd always overcome surprise and new experiences by thinking really hard. If I was really a detective, then I'd outwit this case, too! Even if I couldn't believe in myself, I had faith in my wits! "You're right, Cars," I said. "I remember who I am."

Cars was watching me intently.

"I think deeper and broader than anyone else around."

"That's right," Cars said. "But do you really understand the true nature of what Tsukumojuku called the Beyond?"

I truly believe that there is meaning in my meeting you like this.

Tsukumojuku had smiled.

Everything has meaning.

Of course there was meaning in the fact that I'd met Cars here. Even someone as overwhelming as him was an necessary element for me to perform my role as detective.

I nodded. "You're cool with that?"

Cars smiled. "I have no desire to be the leading man."

Cars was completely down with the theme Tsukumojuku had brought us. His intelligence was blinding. And thanks to Cars, I was finally emotionally ready to step into the gears of the world. With a healthy clank.

I had Cars prepare a reduced power version of the Stand discs for me, and placed one in my head. I first inserted a small sized version of Das Boot: Cars edition, and found the second disc wouldn't go in. Rohan had mentioned that there was a rule, only one Stand per person. Obviously, Cars was the exception. But that was fine. Das Boot was more useful to me than White Snake at the moment.

"Cars, how long till we reach Earth?"

"Another fifteen minutes."

"Hunh? We're that close already?"

"And it seems I've run out of time to eat you all."

"....."

"But I wasn't bored. Don't worry; there'll be plenty of food back on Earth."

I really wasn't worried. "How did our six month journey turn into four hours?"

"I don't completely understand it myself. But it seems this astronaut's Stand has some effect on the flow of time."

White Snake did? It didn't just take Stand and memory

discs? Whatever. "Cars, how much fuel do we have left?"

"As calculated. Just enough."

"We'll slow down before entry, right? Can we let some of it outside the ship for a moment when that happens?"

"For a moment, yes. Do as you please."

But that fuel was extra Cars, wasn't it? As I thought that, Cars said, "One always rules all. The other mes know that."

That's why the other thirty-six didn't hesitate to let original Cars turn them into fuel and spaceship parts.

I looked up at Narancia, who was still gaping at me, the pebble phone forgotten in his hand. "He hang up already?"

"Hunh.....? Ahhh!" He quickly put it to his ear again. "Tch, he hung up! You had to go and blow up all of a sudden. Scared the shit out of me! You OK, dude?"

"Ah ha ha, sorry, I'm fine, I'm fine."

"You're fine, you're fine, my ass. Jesus."

"Narancia, the American army is about to attack Morioh and Nero Nero Island. I'd like to prevent that."

"Yeah, Das Boot, right? Run out on the Cars fuel and boom boom boom? Let's do this shit!"

As out of it has he'd seemed he was clearly following along perfectly well. He wasn't a ranking gangster for nothing. "We're almost at Earth."

"Heh heh. We're still alive!"

"The tough part's still ahead." I turned to Cars. "Can you let Narancia down?"

Cars waved a hand and Narancia was released. "Woo-hoo! Freeeeeeeedom!"

"Ha ha." I turned to the only actual astronaut on the ship. "Pucci, we're almost at Earth."

"...yeah." He staggered to his feet, and moved to the pilot's seat. He picked up the comm device made from bits of the Giottos,

glanced back at Cars a minute, and opened a channel. "Houston, this is Lt. Enrico Pucci. Houston, do you read me?"

There was a crackle over the radio, and an answer. "This is Houston. This is...Pucci, you said? Why are you transmitting on Giotto's frequency?"

"Because I'm on the Giotto."

"...who's with you? Where's Funnier?"

"Funnier's dead."

"....."

"Soundman and Pocoloco, too. Funnier killed them. Tell the President. There will be an accounting for this crime."

"Calm down, Pucci."

"I have never been more calm in my life."

"...where's Cars?"

"He's here."

"OK. We've just pinpointed your location. That...isn't just one Giotto you're on. We've got the size of it on our monitors. It's big, and fast. Like something out of Star Wars. Are you controlling that alone?"

"I don't need to control anything. This thing is made from Cars' own flesh."

"....."

"Tell us the plan to get back to you."

"...ok, ready to hear it?"

The only reason they had a plan that fast is if they'd already prepared it a long time ago. They were ready for anything. The only difference was the passengers involved.

As Pucci and the NASA director hashed out the details, we got closer to Earth. It was growing visibly larger outside our window.

"Wahhhhhhh! Earth!" Narancia yelled, slapping me on the shoulder. "We're home, buddy!"

We're home. I was relieved, as well. But now we had to fight.

Cars was looking at Earth, surprised by the vast expanse of blue. "This is the Earth? Why is there less land?"

I wonder what the Earth looked like before the universe died thirty-six times? Then it occurred to me that maybe I already knew, and I showed Cars the world maps Tsukumojuku and I had exchanged. "This is the world I knew," Cars said.

Tsukumojuku had come from the same universe as original Cars.

It all connected.

"What you're seeing now is The Ocean. Panlandia just happens to be on the other side of the planet at the moment."

"It's like a water vessel," Cars said.

There was thump behind us, and I turned to find Pucci staring at Cars. Was he stunned, or exalted? He looked as if he'd been so surprised he was about to start laughing.

What was he thinking?

The spaceship slowed down, and Cars moved over to the pilot seat, stole Pucci's headset, and said, "Lord Cars is ready to return. Is the party ready?" The fact that Cars appeared to be excited made him extra frightening, and Narancia and I both got very quiet.

He tossed the headset back to Pucci, and turned to us.

"Apparently we can see our landing site from the window right now. There are two islands stacked on top of each other crossing the ocean, and they're in our way, so they're going to get rid of them."

".....!"

Narancia and I both went to the window, and stared down

at the round ball of water. The Ocean was vast, and Morioh and Nero Nero Island were too small and too far for our human eyes to make out.

"I can't see, I can't see!" Narancia yelled, so Cars came up behind him, pushed his fingers into the back of his head, pressed a switch somewhere in his head, and adjusted his vision. Narancia immediately said, "Oh, there it is! I can see it! Shit, shit, shit, there's smoke and fire everywhere! What the fuck!? It's like a god damn war zone."

"Cars," I said. "The fuel, please."

Cars pulled his hand out of Narancia's head, and nodded. Black liquid began bubbling out of the ship outside the window. Living fuel, heading towards Earth. "Narancia, let's do this. Support fire for Morioh and Nero Nero Island."

"Ohhhhh, yeah! C'mon, Jorge! Kill the fuck out of anyone threatening my gang!"

I grabbed the pebble phone and called Shiobana. "Hello?"

"It's Jorge Joestar. We're in orbit. We're going to fire some missiles down at the Americans, so make sure the villagers and islanders are out of the way. And the Stand Masters."

"Ordinary citizens are already evacuated. All Stand Masters will be under Nero Nero Island in the next few minutes. Fire away."

"Roger. But please, try to save as many American wounded as possible."

"...naturally. Fortunately, there are no injured parties from either island yet, so the people are still amenable."

"Good. Commencing attack."

"Roger. Thanks."

I hung up, and turned to Narancia. "Heard that? We aren't killing them. We're disabling their weaponry. Your boss agrees."

"...tch, fuck it then," Narancia grumbled. He pulled out his headset periscope, so I pulled my own out, too.

Since it's my own power, I can easily grasp what it can do.

It was just as Cars said. I didn't know the specifics of the full range of abilities, but I instinctively knew how to control Das Boot.

"Let's fuuuuuuuuuucking goooo, Jorge!" Narancia yelled.

"Fuck yeaah!" I shouted back. "C'mon, Narancia!"

"Rock and Roll! Dive Dive Diiiiiiiiive!"

Our Das Boots surfaced outside the ship, running across the surface of the ejected fuel. Leaving one or two ships inside ourselves, just in case, we both gathered our fleets into one giant submarine each, firing very big missiles.

"All gates open!" Narancia ordered. I opened the hatches on every torpedo and cruise missile I had. "I'm going for the units on the East! You go for the West, Jorge!"

I checked my targets in the periscope. All locked on. "All missiles ready," I said.

"FIIIIIIIIIIIIIRREEEE!" Narancia screamed.

I did.

Pnt pnt pnt pnt pnt pnt pnt pnt!

Pssh pssh pssh pssh pssh pssh pssh pssh

Twenty-four torpedoes sped across the fuel, and thirty-two cruise missiles were hurled up into space, and every single one of them headed straight for the Earth. They entered the atmosphere. Real missiles would have burned up on reentry, just like meteors, but Stands didn't care about physics. They shot towards the two islands at almost exactly the same speed as they'd moved through outer space.

Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud!

We hit every helicopter and battleship the navy had posted around Morioh all at once. We hadn't armed the detonators, so none of them exploded. We just needed to defang them. "Tch... Fucking booooooring," Narancia moaned.

We fired a second wave. This one hit the landing craft as

they approached the shore, and the ships stationed in the harbor. Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud! Once again, no explosions, just robbing the ships of their military capabilities.

"Oh, shit, one's about to sink ♡!" Narancia chuckled.

"Knock that off. Shiobana promised Passione people would help the rescue efforts."

"Eh, eh...? Don't let Giorno know, Jorge!"

"We're about to start our descent," Pucci said, interrupting our celebration. "Pull your Stands back."

The ship had been moving towards reentry this whole time, so while we'd been looking through the periscopes we'd moved quite far away from Morioh and Nero Nero Island, and the two islands had vanished over the crest of the planet. "One more!" Narancia yelled, and as his Das Boot retreated, it fired a hail of missiles at the satellite weapons. Boooooooooom. These exploded.

When I looked shocked, Narancia shrugged. "What? They're unmanned. And having that shit up in space is scary." But now they were space debris, and would cause problems later...but for now, fuck it.

Our Das Boots rejoined the ship, and we continued orbiting the Earth, gradually descending. "Brace yourselves!" Pucci said. "We're going in." Not that he was controlling the ship or anything.

"Let's go!" I said. Narancia joined in. "Go! Back to Earth!"

Just before we hit the atmosphere the pebble phone rang. Plu pon pin para para pon plu pon pin para para pon! Narancia answered. "Hunh? What, Buccellati? Now's not a great time." The ship was starting to shake, but over the racket I could just make out the voice on the other end of the line.

"We've found the bodies of Diavolo and Morioh's serial killer, Kira Yoshikage! Together! Someone took both of them out!

We don't know any more yet!"

Hunh? Kira Yoshikage? They'd been taken out!? So Diavolo and Kira Yoshikage were both dead? Already? Both of them? A mafia boss and a serial killer. Wasn't that good news? I thought, but no, it wasn't. Diavolo and Kira were, in theory, the ones moving the two islands. If they were both dead then neither one of them could move, and the ship with us and Cars on it was falling, and Stand Masters are drawn together...! Hunh!? **Stand Masters are drawn together?**

I shouted at the pebble phone in Narancia's hand, "Tell everyone on the island to run for it! A spaceship's about to crash on top of them!"

But the phone hung up, and I wasn't sure if he'd heard me or not. Narancia and I looked at each other. We might survive landing in the water, but we'd almost certainly die if we crashed into land.

The ship was wrapped in fire, and the extra Cars were burning up, vanishing without so much as a scream. To slow our descent, we spread our wings, and by the time we were through the clouds the fire had vanished and we could see Nero Nero Island and Morioh out the front window. Nero Nero Island was standing on six legs on top of Morioh. This was where we died. But Cars would probably survive. "Sorry, Narancia," I said. "You would never have gone to Mars if you weren't with me."

Whoops. Brought an anomaly along, but...it all means something, I'm sure. Bye!

Tsukumojuku had brought both of us. And it did have meaning. "Thanks," I said. "If you hadn't been there, I'd never have seen the Earth again."

Tears in his eyes, Narancia said, "Tch...you gotta make a big

deal about it? I hate sappy shit!"

I laughed, closed my eyes, and wondered who I should be thinking of in my last moments, but inside my brain just started jumping from Tsukumojuku's arrival to entering Morioh to going to Mars, leaping randomly around different scenes from this adventure, and I found myself mildly impressed by how amazing it had all been. I opened my eyes long enough to confirm that the ship was definitely headed directly at Morioh. Pucci was watching the same scene through the other window.

"So this is the rhinoceros beetle!" he said.

Our ship was headed right for the Arrow Cross House, and when he saw the ship of the roof, Pucci cried out happily, "And that's the Via Dolorosa!"

Rhinoceros beetle. Via Dolorosa. Those were two of the fourteen words carved into the back of the Giotto plate.

Via Dolorosa = The Way of Suffering. The last road Jesus Christ walked, dragged past the townsfolk, carrying his cross on his back. It was also called the Via Crucis, the Way of the Cross. As we were falling upside-down, the Arrow Cross below us was at our backs.

And the spaceship with us and Cars on it crashed directly into the Arrow Cross, and the shock of the impact knocked Nero Nero Island off Morioh, and flipped Morioh upside-down.

And as if there had always been another upside-down island underneath Morioh, when Morioh flipped another island rose from the sea. A massive island, 900 times the size of Morioh, that forced the water out away from it, but the American battleships and aircraft carriers were just rocked a little, the wave passing without further incident. The 219,850 km² island that appeared out of nowhere was one no one in our world had ever

heard of – Great Britain.

The mythical England.

When I'd stepped off the train in Morioh, and looked at the map of the town it had seemed familiar. Just before we hit, I'd seen it from the sky, and remembered that feeling.

Had I been here before?

That was all in my head. I had just been remembering the map of the world Tsukumojuku had drawn for me, and recognized the shape of England. But since it had been backwards, I hadn't recognized it. I hate saying that only human, but I clearly had to work on my observation skills. If I'd worked harder, maybe I'd have survived!

THIRTEEN
The Enemy
敵

However many copies of Antonio Torres there were, this was no time to be fainting. I told Lisa Lisa what had happened with Jim Graham, and she said, "He pulled out his own tongue and internal organs? Hunh...so he emptied out his body. He threw the insides into the ocean, but is back at base...so what's inside his body?"

There was no doubt in my mind. Antonio Torres has showed himself moments before Jim snapped. There was no sign of him after we crashed, but he hadn't just vanished into thin air like some sort of ghost. Had he climbed inside Jim's body while I was trying to snap a second photograph?

"If that theory is correct," Lisa Lisa went on, "Then the problem is, he retains enough to fly a plane and blend in at the base without anyone realizing he isn't the real Jim. Antonio Torres was a mean kid, but not stupid; and if knowledge and personality are harbored in the skin then that's a vital fact me and the other Hamon Warriors need to know."

Antonio had acquired a shocking new power to escape the pain of his mother's abuse. He could shed his own skin like a snake, give it to his batshit crazy mom, but for that skin to remain alive (yet dead) was...

"Two other problems," Lisa Lisa said. "If he is wearing Jim Graham's body, how is Antonio Torres walking around in broad daylight?"

Oh, right, I thought. Some of the Gremlin sightings reported small 50 centimeter ones showing up in the day, but the one meter 30 centimeter ones only appeared at night or on cloudy days.

"Second, we have an intelligent zombie who can hide inside a human being, allowing them to operate during the day. And by simple arithmetic there are more than sixteen thousand of these. If they weren't messing about with planes for fun, but to learn the construction and how to fly them, than that could be very bad. Zombies can move anywhere in the world very quickly, and there are a lot of dead bodies lying around right now. If the zombies

brought those bodies to life, and those new zombies attacked the living, creating even more zombies, then the zombie empire would expand explosively, far faster than any pyramid scheme."

A ripple of alarm went through the Hamon Warriors around us.

Lisa Lisa turned to face Straits and the others. "Antonio Torres was on La Palma, and knows about the Hamon Warriors. He knows I'm one of them, and he's seen me come to get Jorge, so I'm sure he's already taken action. Whatever he does next will be big. We have to move quickly ourselves, while keeping an eye on the English Air Force."

"Mm," Straits said, nodding. "But how can we fight zombies flying fighter planes? We can't lace the ships' bullets with Hamon, and Hamon doesn't travel through the air. Sitting in the cockpit, there's no way for us to touch the zombies directly."

"Don't worry. Jorge will shoot them all down," Lisa Lisa said. She wasn't smiling. Woah, woah, I thought but then FOOOM a huge impact rocked the ground, reminding me that we were on a battlefield. A Hamon Warrior came rushing in.

"Enemy attack! The English are bombing us!" No sooner had the words left his mouth than the hallway exploded, blowing him away.

Ka-boom!

A cloud of smoke and dust was left behind. The lights went out.

"Lisa Lisa!" "Jorge!" Our cries overlapped. I reached out my hand and found she had done the same, and our hands clasped. "This way!" she yelled, and pulled me after her into a run. Thuddd! Boom! More explosions shook the underground headquarters. The ceiling fell, and the walls crumbled as we ran past.

"How did they find us?" Lisa Lisa asked.

"They must have tailed us in the Motorizing!" I said.

"Impossible! Steven and I would have noticed if we were followed! I was watching for that the whole time!"

"Then you've got a mole!"

".....!?"

The underground passage led down to a cave that opened onto the ocean, and the cave had been modified into a harbor. As we burst out of the passage, Steven waved his hand. "Jorge! Over here!" Two hydroplane Motorizings were floating in the harbor, and Lisa Lisa and I jumped into one. The engine was already running, and the propellers spinning. The second we were in the cockpit, Steven yelled, "You know how to fly it, right, Jorge!?"

I threw him a thumbs up. "Got it! I've been flying a while now."

"Ha ha ha! Then we'll have no problem with these monsters! They're just copying what they saw real pilots do!"

Damn straight.

Steven and I started our planes taxiing. We ran side by side through the cave, engines sputtering, two walls of water spraying up behind us. The moment we left the cave mouth we started rising. I looked up and at a glance saw at least a dozen English Air Force Sopwith Camels whirling overhead, dropping bombs on the hidden base. "Stop it!" I shouted, but to no avail. Between the thunder of the bombs and the roar of our engines my voice never reached them, and my friends flying those Camels were already dead. I passed close enough to make sure, and the pilots eyes were focused on nothing, his head twisted in an unnatural direction, a horrible rictus smile on his face.

Lisa Lisa reached up from behind, and put her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm fine. Thanks," I said, but I doubt she heard me. The pilots I'd fought alongside were gone now. Planes that had given me courage were just enemy machines now. But I was glad to know for sure. I accepted it, and it gave me strength. Thanks, I thought. You've made it easier to pull the trigger. Now I could focus on protecting the Hamon Warriors. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! My machine gun fired. One plane down, and Steven was starting his

the pilot stood up in his seat, turned towards me, opened his mouth and paper-thin Antonio Torres came slithering out of him, spread himself out and came soaring towards us like a flying squirrel. "Jorge Joestar! You gotta lotta nerve growing up before I did!" he shouted as he flew, and I broke up laughing. That was his big problem! Behind me, Lisa Lisa said, "OK, this is my job." She stood up, and her skirt instantly turned inside out. As I gaped at her beautiful legs, she said, "Jorge, when this war's over, let's get married."

"Eh? OK.hunh?"

"Come on, Antonio Torres! You remember me, right?"

Flying Squirrel Antonio yelped. "Lisa Lisa!? Seriously? Balsa Blanca really is a pathetic limp-dicked motherfucker!" It had been a while since I'd heard him sing that song and it rattled me a bit, but I yelled back, "Says the undead flat dick! I knew you were always a hollow son of a bitch but I guess you wanna blame that shit on your psycho mom, hunh?"

"What the fuck!?" Apparently mentioning his mom really ticked him off and he bared his fangs and jumped at me but I couldn't dodge. Just before his teeth sank into my neck Lisa Lisa's thin arm reached down at grabbed a handful of Antonio's neck.

"Unh...leggo of me, ugly!" Antonio really hadn't changed at all. He was just like he'd been when we were kids, and that was both dumb and kinda unnerving. Lisa Lisa said curtly, "I have no words to waste on you."

"What? You..." Antonio began, but cracks began spreading out from where Lisa Lisa was holding him, and his body turned to dust, scattered away on the winds.

Lisa Lisa dusted her hands off, and sat back down. "Five more. You have enough bullets?"

"Yeah." I had enough for fifty.

Bang bang bang! Boom.

Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat! Ka-boom.

My bullets hit the zombie planes, destroying their wings or

engines. "The Germans are way better!" I shouted, but of course they were. The enemy pilots were enemies, but they were also pilots, and I had respect for their skills. But I felt no such thing for these zombies. I was just pissed that they were flying around in the English Air Force's valuable equipment. Shit! Shit! Shit! Fucking Antonio Torres! Forcing me to shoot down English planes!

Steven shot down two as well. I hadn't been counting, but Lisa Lisa said I'd shot down twenty-three. Shooting down that many in a single dogfight would normally make me a Flying Ace. Sadly, since I was fighting zombies instead of real pilots my claim was invalid. It wasn't even worth bragging about. All I could think about was what a waste of planes it was... The Hamon Warriors were checking the wreckage, running Hamon through the pilot's bodies just in case, killing the Antonios.

That was too easy, I thought.

They'd spent years slowly learning how to fly a plane, then attacked the English Air Force and stole their pilots and planes, and that was the best they could muster? The only damage to the Hamon Warriors had been in the initial bombing, and since their base had been underground the damage from bombs on the ground had been limited. Antonio Torres must have known how good a pilot I was, so he should have known things would turn out this way. He was a crafty bastard, after all.

So what was the point of this battle?

Either a diversion or an attempt to delay me. Either way, the assumed intent of the attack – wiping out the Hamon Warriors – was not the real goal. So what was? Antonio's own words echoed in my ears.

Hey, Jorge Joestar...I'm afraid you're gonna die here. And after you're dead, I'm gonna kill your family, too. Their deaths will be even worse than yours.

That piece of shit had promised to kill my family.

"Lisa Lisa."

"Mm?"

"I need a phone."

I called my mother. Star Mark Tradings, the company she ran near the London Harbor. I wasn't panicking yet, but she'd seen them coming. "A lot of planes just flew in off the sea."

Calm down. "Mum, get Penelope, leave London, and get to the house in Westwood. Now."

"Whatever for, Jorge? What's going on? All those planes were English. Everyone's getting ready to celebrate the return of the triumphant heroes."

"Triumphant?"

"The planes are all in a state. They've got bullet holes in them, or wings that clearly broke and were patched together again."

Planes filled with the war dead. I looked out the window. It was still light out, but in England...? "Is the sun out?"

"It's not raining, but it's very cloudy."

"Mum."

"I understand. I'll go back to the Joestar mansion, and hide in the basement with Penelope and Jonathan. Where are you?"

"France. But I'm with Lisa Lisa."

"Oh. Then you're safe."

"But the Hamon Warriors can't fly planes, and what's flying into London are dead pilots." But they don't have Antonio inside them. If the sun wasn't out, they wouldn't need to let Antonio fly. If the dead pilots were still as good as they'd been alive, this time we might be in for a real fight. "I'm gonna have to fight."

"...oh. Your father fought his own battle. And he won. I am sure you will emerge victorious, too."

"Thank you. I'll get there as fast as I can. Hurry, Mum."

"Yes. Don't worry about us. I'm leaving now. I love you, Jorge."

"I love you, too, Mum."

I hung up, then had an idea, and dialed another number. "Whaaat? Jorge Joestar! If you're calling, you must not be part of that huge squad in the sky, hunh? What's up with that, some sort of air show? Did England win some big victory I didn't hear about?" The excited man who answered was John Moore-Brabazon. He'd quit flying planes five years ago after Charles Rolls' accident, but he was still working as an engineer in the city.

"Promise to believe what I tell you, John?" I said.

"Hunh? Ha ha. What? Of course, don't be stupid."

"Those guys flying in aren't us. They're enemies. They're not even human. They're all dead. They've returned from Hell to make the living like them."

".....!?! Uh....Jorge, what the...?"

"Look at those planes closely, John. Recognize any of them? Those planes belong to dead men. They shouldn't be in the air."

"Dead men? Hunh? What the...That's Rupert Stiller's Mary. And David Seymour's Emma!"

Both of them were former Royal Aero Club members lost in combat; Mary and Emma were both Henry Farman IIIs, planes made in France. John found former friend after former friend in the sky; he'd been flying from the very start, so he knew a lot of fallen pilots.

"Augh...Joe Dearlove's up there too," he said. I could hear him crying.

I kept my voice calm. "They're all dead. But something evil has dragged our dead friends out from someplace very dark. John. They're going to kill Englishmen, and eat them."

"...eat!?! What do you mean?"

"I mean that literally. They eat living humans."

"They'd never do that...!"

"They aren't the friends you knew. Your dead friends are still dead. They haven't come back to life. Their bodies have just stepped out of their graves, and into those planes."

"AHHH!"

I heard an explosion on the other end of the line. It was starting. "What the fuck!? English planes are attacking London!"

"John, calm down and listen. You and anyone else alive out there have to fight them. I'll be there as soon as I can. You hear me?"

"What the fuck!? God damn it! Stop!" John yelled. He'd put the receiver down.

So I yelled down the line, "John Moore-Brazabon! Listen! This is in your hands! Get as many men together as you can, get them in their planes, and start fighting back! Don't fuck around! Just do it! They're already dead, and won't die if you just kill them normally! You gotta annihilate them!" This was a horrible thing to say. But I had to put it like that.

"Auuggghhhhhh, Jorge! Is this really happening!?"

"John! I'm flying there as soon as I hang up! You fight, and you live through this, OK?"

There was another explosion, and the line went dead in the middle. I put the phone down, turned around, and found the Hamon Warriors listening, dressed for war. "The main force is attacking England," I said. "They're flying planes that were shot down, the pilots killed. They're English planes, so they faced no resistance until they started the attack. They're already over London, and it sounds like they just started firing. By the time we get their, their invasion will be well underway. Contact any Hamon Warriors in England. If any of them have contacts in the English army, direct them to fight back. There'll be plenty of zombies shot down who survived, so we'll need men on the ground as well. Tell anyone you know to run and hide. I'm heading off to fight. I'll knock as many zombies as I can out of the sky. Please save any survivors."

We all ran. When Lisa Lisa tried to jump on the Motorizing after me, I said, "Lisa Lisa, it'll be dangerous." She ignored me. She

was still wearing a skirt, so I said, "Sure you don't want to put some trousers on?" She just laughed.

"Don't worry, I've been a girl a while, I've figured out how to keep the contents of my skirt hidden."

That wasn't what I was driving at, but this was Lisa Lisa. If Lisa Lisa said she'd be fine, she'd be fine. "Oh, but I'll take this," she said, stealing my aviator hat. "Oh, you can keep these," she said, handing the goggles back. ...fine. Steven was climbing into the plane next to us. Honestly, that last fight had just proved how little combat experience he had, but I didn't stop him.

Once again, Steven and I sped out of the cave for the ocean and the sky. We took a quick look glance at the condition of the surface after the bombing, and then headed West across the North Sea. The attack had been intense, but like I thought, relatively few casualties. It was an hour's flight from here to London. How bad would the zombie invasion be before we got there? The dead were mostly flying planes lost in the war, but how well armed were they? If they only had the ammo they'd been shot down with, then probably not that much, but Antonio Torres wasn't likely to half-ass something like that. He'd already taken over the English Naval Air Force headquarters, so he'd most likely stolen all the bombs and bullets he needed. This was gonna be brutal. "Hey, Jorge," Lisa Lisa said. "I got a favor to ask."

"What?"

"Can you give me a quick run down on how to fly a plane?"

By the time we were almost across the North Sea Lisa Lisa was flying my Motorizing. "Hmm...and other planes more or less work the same?"

"Yeah. What you need to control them is always the same, and basically they all have a long body with wings and propellers in front."

"Got it," she said, looking over the instrument panel in a

way that made me worried.

"What are you planning?"

"Last time I just sat behind you and couldn't do anything, right? So this time I thought I'd go for broke."

I got even more worried. "Go for broke how?"

"Whatever occurs to me in the moment. Oh, right," she said, and turned the stick to the side, placing us in front of Steven. "Jorge, take over."

"Eh?" Lisa Lisa stood up, I scrambled into the cockpit next to her and grabbed the flight stick, and she moved, but not into the back seat – she jumped out into thin air. "Augh! Lisa Lisa!" She jumped with so little wind up I thought it was accidental, but she'd tied to loose end of the thread in her scarf to the control stick. The thread was unraveling quickly, and stretched from my plane to the air above Steven's. Lisa Lisa let go of the thread and landed right behind Steven. Steven looked every bit as flabbergasted as I was. I quickly shifted my plane so I was flying next to him, and heard her shouting something at Steven. "...don't worry!" she said, and then put her hands on his shoulders, brushed them gently down his back to his shoulder blades, gave him a push and then pulled back from him and Steven's wings came out in her palms. Steven looked surprised by this, but did not appear to be in pain. Once the big white wings were both fully emerged from his back, Lisa Lisa said something to Steven, tapped him on his shoulder, stood up, and glanced over at me with a smile. I think she said something too, but it was lost in the roar of the engines and propellers...but then Lisa Lisa jumped out of the cockpit, ran across the top of the Motorize past Steven and onto the wing. The wind force had her leaning damn near 90 degrees and her skirt was going crazy, but she ran all the way down the wing and then jumped off and landed on my wing, skirt still flapping like crazy, and then ran up my wing back to me. "I'm back!" she said, and flopped down behind me.

507 When I didn't say anything, Lisa Lisa explained, "I figured Steven should have his wings out! I hear that can hurt a lot, so I

scattered the pain with Hamon and got them out for him."

Heh...I see. **This time I thought I'd go for broke.** Ah ha ha. Lisa Lisa's definition of going for broke was clearly beyond the capacity of my imagination. This gave me courage.

"Jorge, I can see it!" Lisa Lisa cried, pointing far across the sky, where thick clouds covered the ground. The lower end of the clouds had a dull orange glow. They were lit by fire. London was burning.

"Let's do this, Lisa Lisa!" "Yeah!" I glanced over at Steven, and he nodded back. I looked forward again, and I could just make out the silhouettes of the fighter planes in the air ahead. The closer we got the most horrifying the scene became. There were nearly three hundred airplanes in the sky above London, all lined up and circling the town. As if drawing a massive magic circle in the air above the city. "I've never seen a battle like this," I muttered. Of course not. We were fighting the dead. Their tactics and strategies would bear no resemblance to those of the living. "I'm gonna do what I do, you just fight how you need," Lisa Lisa said, putting her hands on my shoulders and standing up. "And like I said before, my skirt'll be fine, don't worry."

I looked up and saw her grinning. "Don't you dare die, Lisa Lisa," I said. She was gonna be my wife.

She met my gaze. "I won't die. Don't you dare die, either. We'll win here, go home, and get married."

"I'll hold you to that promise."

"Heh heh. Just hold up your end."

"I will!"

Vrroooooom! As we drew closer, some of the zombie pilots saw us, and began shouting. Their formation splintered, and ten planes turned towards us, but we shot past without engaging. Just the two of us against this massive force. The most chaos we caused the better. Bam bam bam bam! Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba! Bang bang bang bang! We dodged fire from multiple machine guns and slammed into the center of the magic circle, and several pilots were so

surprised by us cutting across their formation they accidentally turned into the plane next to them, crashing into each other. At least five or six planes exploded and went down all at once. For patched up wrecks these planes were flying well; they must have zombie engineers to go along with the zombie pilots. I let out a roar and the zombies responded with their own guttural shrieks, echoing across the sky.

"Here I go!" Lisa Lisa said, and began running up the front of the Motorizing. She put one foot on the wing and jumped just as an enemy plane came by. She grabbed its wheels with one hand and was whisked away from me. She must have run Hamon through the plane; the zombie pilot howled and his body melted away. I circled for a moment, keeping an eye on her, but she scrambled up the side of the plane and slid into the pilot seat, and without even a glance in my direction began firing the plane's guns. Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba! Boom! Boom! Boom! Her first volley took out three planes and I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Ah ha ha! Amazing!" I said, but I didn't have time to gawk. Lisa Lisa was clearly doing fine, so fine I'd have to kick things up a notch or I'd wind up as baggage. I couldn't jump from plane to plane like she did so I'd have to fight with the bullets I had. In other words, I had to aim carefully. So I forced myself to remain calm, move the stick rhythmically, concentrate. Rat-tat-tat! Boom! Rat-tat-tat! Blaaam! No matter where I aimed there were enemy planes, so at first every bullet I shot sent a zombie spiraling down, but this time the zombie's rotting bodies had been in combat before, and they quickly adapted to my assault. I was sure I'd known the guy who turned to fight me. A Frenchman named Vincent Lecoecur. A Nieuport 17 with a picture of a dog painted on its belly. That was his, alright. The Nieuport had a max speed of 177 kph and he'd made the thing go 200, and even dead his thirst for speed was unabated and he shot past my plane like a bolt of lightning. But I didn't chase him. I pressed on towards the center of the magic circle. Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat-tat! Each and every time a grossly discolored fleshbag crossed my sights I shot

them and the metal box they sat in down. The planes broke up and the zombies popped out and as they passed me every one of them was leaking all over and grinning, eyes rolling the wrong way; out of the cockpit they were all just corpses that hadn't died. Shit, I thought. At least try and fight back before you die again! But a group of zombies had seen me and formed a squad and were starting to chase me around so I also thought maybe don't try so hard, guys, you're dead. I knew I shouldn't be feeling sympathy for zombies just because they'd been pilots once. I shook off a four finger formation with a series of loops and Aileron rolls, and shot the zombie planes down. Rat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! I did not escape unscathed. A storm of bullets from a fleet of Sopwith Camels hit the belly of my Motorizing. "Fuck!" I shot the Camels down from above but Vincent Lecoeur's Nieuport 17 came at me again and hit my wing dead on. Rat-tat-tat-tat! Direct hit. Crack! Crack craaaack crack... my wing split down the middle but as it did the other Motorizing slipped in under me. Steven! He waved for me to jump down, but uh, really? But if I stayed where I was the plane would fall apart around me. Jumping into Steven's plane was totally impossible but I flung myself out of the cockpit and put myself at the mercy of the winds. "Aughhhhhhhh!" As I did the wing came off completely and the Motorizing shot upwards and away, breaking apart. Steven's Motorizing came up under me, gently catching me in the rear seat. "God daaaaaamn!" I yelled, clutching the seat for dear life. I reached between his great white wings and slapped Steven on the back. "Thank you, Steven!"

"Ha ha! Glad that worked. You're really something, man, its all I can do to run."

"Heh heh, but you've done all right at that!"

"Yeah, but I gotta fight a little, here! You take the plane."

"Hunh?"

"Look at her!" Steven was, of course, pointing at Lisa Lisa. She was bounding from plane to plane, frying the zombie pilot, then pulling the trigger as long as there were bullets left, enemy

seconds earlier he'd shot down another Camel I'd been flying. Damn it, Jim, you're a way better pilot now that you're a zombie. Does being hollowed out make it easier for you to move? I grabbed the Fokker's stick and yelled, "Let's try this again, Jim!" Jim's Camel had been wheeling around, as if waiting for me to get ready, but now he came hurtling towards me. I rolled to avoid the bullets, and pulled the trigger, the bullets on the Fokker's machine guns timed to fire through the propellers without hitting them. Click. Click.

Um.

What? They'd jammed? Shit. I looked front and Jim was grinning at me even though he was a zombie and I got mad so as we passed each other I wagged my wings and hit Jim in the head with the Fokker's wingtip, decapitating him. Splat! No blood came out of his neck stump. There was a huge hole in the cross-section, proving he'd been emptied out. There wasn't a single Antonio Torres anywhere in the skies over London. He must be somewhere else entirely, doing something else evil. I looked around and found the skies were quiet. Lisa Lisa had blown the last zombie away and brought its plane in diagonally above my Fokker. Then she hopped out of the cockpit.

"Jorge!" "Yikes!"

I let go of the stick, held up my arms, and caught her in mid air. She was doing a very good job keeping that skirt from showing too much, I thought.

She gave me a big hug, and said, "That was incredible! Jorge, you really have become strong! Look! The three of us saved the skies of London!"

I looked around. The clouds still glowed orange, but there were no more zombies flying. I could hear cheering. From the burning streets of London. I looked down, and the zombies we'd shot down were being chased around by crowds of people. The Hamon Warriors had arrived on the ground, and were turning zombie after zombie into ash and smoke.

"Looks like they're done over there, too," Lisa Lisa said. I turned to look, and ten English planes were approaching from the North, flashing their lights in Morse Code to prove they weren't more zombies. Lisa Lisa could read Morse Code, and she translated for me. "'Good job taking back London. Thanks!'" When I saw who sent that signal, I almost wept.

It was John Moore-Brazabon.

"Sorry we're late. We decided to control the perimeter and keep them trapped in London.' Hmph. Jorge, should I say they gave up too easily?"

"Uh...ah ha ha, no, don't!"

"Pfft."

As we passed each other, John and I grinned and held our thumbs up, but when he saw Lisa Lisa sitting on my knees John looked surprised, then mimed a whistle. Then Steven came out from the Fokker's shadow, wings stretched out behind him, and John's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Seems about right," Steven said, laughing. "That was John Moore-Brazabon," I said. "He's connected politically, might be able to parlay you helping save London into a pardon."

Steven shot me a look. "I knew you were innocent, but couldn't do a thing to save you. And you make an offer like that back? You're too good for this world."

I really didn't care about that. "We're war buddies now."

We both reached out our hands, and I shook Steven's hand as we rode the wind.

"Thanks, Jorge. Thanks for saving England. Thanks for saving the world." Tears started welling up in Steven's eyes, and I thought he was overstating things but we did win and maybe we had saved England and maybe we had saved the world.

"The three of us did it together," I said. "Thank you, Steven. And thank you, Lisa Lisa."

Her arm still around me, Lisa Lisa closed her eyes, smiled, and said not a word. Oh, I thought. This was what she did every

day.

Save the world.

Hamon Warriors were sent to every corner of England, and reports came back that no further signs of zombie invasion had been found. But we knew a few thousand, possibly even tens of thousands of Antonio Torres were still hiding somewhere, so the Hamon Warriors kept digging, and instituted a national health exam to make sure there were none hiding inside ordinary citizens.

Steven went back to the Motorize Manor, Lisa Lisa went back to the Hamon Warriors, and I went on with the war, and lost a lot of friends, but somehow boring dicks like William Cardinal stayed alive. Cardinal survived the attack on the Naval Air Force Base by Antonio Torres with nothing worse than a broken leg, and then told everyone he'd ordered me to the fight in London and was treated like even more of a hero than I was, got himself promoted, and by the time the war ended and the Army and Naval Air Forces had been merged into the English Air Force, he was the supreme commander, never had to go to any dangerous fronts, and got to sit in his damn wheelchair acting like a big shot, but whatever, the war was finally wrapping up.

The only good thing about wars was that they ended.

So with the war over, I went back to Westwood and the Joestar Mansion, and wondered what to do with myself. Flying fighter planes had been a great job but I'd quite like to get married and have some kids so maybe a less potentially fatal job would be good, like a pilot on a merchant plane. Maybe take it easy flying passengers around. But John Moore-Brazabon asked me to get involved in politics and since we'd had a lot of fun doing cars and planes together I could totally see the appeal of doing something new, but I'd been with John a while now and I thought that, as a

man, it was high time I did something on my own so I kinda wanted to try something else, too. I thought about things for a while and man, Lisa Lisa was sure taking her time coming. Hunh. What was going on there? I figured she was busy, but Lisa Lisa was never not busy so that hardly presented a problem.

Had she changed her mind? That thought made it feel like something was squeezing all the air out of my heart so I got real serious about it real fast. What had I done?

Ever since the Attempted Zombie Invasion of London I'd just continued on with the war against humans, but...thinking about it, I remembered the stories my war buddies had told. "I was just" excuses never seemed to work with girlfriends and wives. Lots of times the thing they were 'just' doing was what caused the strife in the first place, and since they didn't do much of anything besides what they were 'just' doing, and it was often the case that their girls wanted them doing something else.

It was hard for me to believe that Lisa Lisa disapproved of me going to war and flying planes in it. So the latter situation was more likely to apply here. All I'd done was the war, so I'd almost certainly failed to do something Lisa Lisa wanted me to do. Mm, if Lisa Lisa has been expecting something from me, I was absolutely confident I had failed to live up to that expectation. I'd seriously done nothing else but the war, and we hadn't even seen each other in three whole years. I hadn't called her at all, or even written her a letter.

But I mean, we'd always been that way, right? After Lisa Lisa joined the Hamon warriors and went off with Straits, I'd only seen her the night lots of people died in the church on La Palma, in the darkness of the underground shrine in Rome, in jail, and the day we exterminated all the zombies in London. Man. That wasn't nearly enough. Had we really only been together two weeks in the last seventeen years? Our time in jail was comparatively long, but otherwise we'd only met four times.

Four? Eh? Really? I felt like we'd met and talked and been

together a lot more than that but we really hadn't. It was like we just coincidentally bumped into each other during some crisis or other. Wait, I realized...that's what it was like when we were kids. We only met when I was in trouble. Like I only needed Lisa Lisa when my back was to the wall...and not just that, Lisa Lisa also only met me when she in a tight spot. Was that enough for both of us, then?

But I was old enough to know better now. Couples, married or not, did not last long if they only met when absolutely necessary. It was vital they be together on ordinary days, and spend time together doing nothing in particular; that was what cemented their bonds. Oh, shit, I thought. This was bad. We needed a relationship revolution! With that wind in my sails I decided to go see Lisa Lisa. According to mum, she was in Switzerland. Switzerland? Nice. Nobody looked better backed by snow covered mountains than I did. All fired up I dashed off to Switzerland, grabbed Lisa Lisa, and yelled:

"Damn it, Lisa Lisa, if you don't love me why'd you say you wanted to marry me!?"

....uh. Hunh!? I had no idea why I'd said it like that. It was a total sulky whine, made me sound as dumb as I was, like a toddler. I'd planned on being very mature, and expressing my desire to date properly, to face our feelings, to strengthen our relationship over time, to take things to another level. And yet...

I stood their flapping my lips and uttering strange gasps, unable to say anything else at all, much less correct course. Lisa Lisa stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing. To my great relief. Lisa Lisa was just as she always was, and seeing that bright smile of hers was all I needed to know I'd been trapped in a mental cage of my own devising.

"Don't be ridiculous, Jorge," Lisa Lisa said, exactly as I'd

secretly hoped she would. "Why would you ever think I didn't love you? Of course I love you. Can you not tell without seeing me? I'd think you should know that much even when we're apart. Loving you is a foundation of my personality! You know me better than anyone, so I think you know that much, too."

I did. But I got scared anyway.

Then Lisa Lisa said, "Sorry, I'm sure this is because the war ended but all I'm doing is Hamon warrior work."

Yeah, well, exactly, yes.

"I really am sorry," she went on. "I genuinely wanted to go running straight to you, Jorge. I've been waiting and waiting and waaaaiting for the war to end! Heh heh, sorry, I sound like a little girl, don't I? I'm almost thirty! I act more grown up with everyone else, but when I'm with you, Jorge, I feel like we're kids again, and that shows in how I act."

I mean, she didn't even look twenty yet, and to my eyes she basically hadn't changed at all since I was ten.

But when I hastily tried to tell her this she said, "But I was just so scared. I mean, Master Tom Petty went and said something ridiculous about you dying around the time we get married."

Uh, what?

He can use Hamon to predict what will happen in the future.

This old bald dude was how she'd been able to find me stranded in the North Sea. Ngapoi Ngawang Tom Petty.

Lisa Lisa had started crying, so I said, "I'm not going to die, Lisa Lisa. I promise I won't. You remember my dad, right? Joestar men don't die and leave their wives or lovers. I won't wind up as just a head, though; me and all parts of me will stay with you."

Lisa Lisa flung herself into my arms, nestled her head in my chest, and kept on crying so I got mad. Where was that bald son of a bitch? I was ready to kill him for spouting crap and making Lisa

Lisa feel like this...was there any way to prevent his prophecy from coming true?

Seeing red, I dragged a reluctant Lisa Lisa around looking for Tom Petty, and found him. Face to face, his intimidating aura instantly killed my rage, and I asked with a smile, "Sorry, about this prophecy that I'll die..."

Tom Petty adjusted the layers of Eastern gowns he wore. "You'll die. What? You thought you wouldn't?"

..... "Not natural causes, right? I heard some nonsense about me dying right after Lisa Lisa and I get married."

"I speak neither lies nor nonsense."

"That's right," Lisa Lisa said, wiping her tears. "Tom Petty would never do that."

C'mon Lisa Lisa, don't you want to fight this thing, too? But I guess saying as much wouldn't do much to fate or destiny, and Lisa Lisa knew full well (and I kinda knew, too) that those things could absolutely be foretold by someone properly prophetic. So I guess we had to accept it. But just as my emotions were starting to settle down, Tom Petty looked puzzled, and said, "But maybe you won't die. Mm? No, you won't. I dunno. Up to you."

Hunh? We both looked up, surprised.

"You have, um..." Tom Petty said. "A god of sorts – not the God, mind you, but a god – looking out for you."

This again. A god that chose an individual on a whim.

Beyond.

For the first time in god knows how long, I remembered the

words my friend Tsukumojuku had said. **And I have a name for this thing guiding me from somewhere not of this world. I call it: Beyond.**

"It seems you're aware of the concept," Tom Petty said. "Up to you whether to believe in it or not, Jorge Joestar. If you believe in it, you won't die. If you can't put your faith in it, then you will be brutally murdered by something terrifying, as fated."

"I believe," I blurted.

Tsukumojuku had said, **With Beyond at your side, your adventure will be without compare.**

Tom Petty's steely eyes softened in a smile. "Then I guess you won't die."

Uh...was it that easy? Lisa Lisa looked pretty stunned by this, too.

"That god may not have made up its mind, either. But if you wish to go on living, you must follow that god."

Well, then, no help for it, I now believed in Beyond. But I wasn't exactly sure how to do this, so I just thought, thanks in advance! And didn't really do anything else about it.

Then Lisa Lisa and I left Switzerland, went back home, announced our engagement, and started planning the wedding. This church, then a party in the garden at the Joestar mansion, so we'd need drinks and food, and what kind of music should the band play, anyway? Lisa Lisa and mom and Penelope went on and on and on and on about that sort of thing.

I was relieved to see Penelope enjoying herself; she'd been at odds with Lisa Lisa before. Penelope picked up on my relief and explained, "But Lisa Lisa's amazing! I could never measure up. I'm glad it's Lisa Lisa, really. If it was anyone else I'd be jealous, but with Lisa Lisa I just can't bring myself to feel that way!"

I remembered Darlington saying much the same thing. **No, I think the truth is, very few girls can live up to someone so**

beautiful and...and amazing. I agreed, Lisa Lisa was beautiful and amazing and I was still laughing about it when I got her pregnant.

Crap.

But mom and Penelope were explosively happy. They both let out long, shrill shrieks of joy when they heard. Lisa Lisa was super embarrassed but also really happy, so I was relieved, but I wondered what Straits would think.

"I don't think he'd think anything of it," Lisa Lisa said. "And it's really early still, so let's wait a bit, and let him know when things have settled down a bit."

Then Lisa Lisa and mom and Penelope redid their whole plan. They considered trying to do it before she showed, but that was deemed too fast, so they decided to have it after the baby was born, and in the end our wedding was moved to the next year.

With the child being born first, everyone treated Lisa Lisa like an absolute queen. Old man Speedwagon sent presents at an shocking rate, one of everything for boys and girls. I let out my first ever happy scream.

"Please, calm down!" I begged, unable to wipe the grin off my face. "I'll do as I damn well please!" Speedwagon said, standing his ground. Ah ha ha.

Then the baby was born. A boy.

We named him Joseph Joestar. That way he'd be a Jojo, too. He inherited Lisa Lisa's talents, and even as a baby he defaulted to Hamon breathing, and whenever I tried to change his diaper or hold him I'd wind up hopping around going bzzzzt bzzzzt, stunned. When Joseph cried in my arms electric shocks ran from the top of my head down my left hip and I nearly passed out, but I held fast and acted like nothing was wrong. Of course this was just me and it proved no problem for Lisa Lisa, so Lisa Lisa gave me a scarf made from the same stuff as hers. The Smrtipologian Beetle's thread. It blocked the Hamon and scattered it harmlessly, and now I could wrap Joseph in it to change his diaper, hold him, or take him in the bath...except the water conducted Hamon well, so the beetles

weren't helpful there.

Anyway, we set the wedding date late enough that Joseph would be able to hold his head up. Everything was prepared properly, and the only thing left to worry about was the weather. On the morning of November 11th, I was all decked out in my air force full-dress uniform when John Moore-Brabazon came in, grinning ear to ear in his tuxedo. "So this best man of yours isn't here yet?" he asked. Hunh? Who, Steven Motorize? "Heh heh heh, he overdo it a bit at the bachelor party last night? Tch. Whatever, don't worry about it, I'll be happy to be the best man in his place."

For some reason John was campaigning to be my best man, and frankly it had not been an easy choice on my part, but I simply couldn't pick anyone but my first friend in England, my neighbor, and the man who'd saved my life.

So, to avoid upsetting my bride, I elected to sneak off to the Motorize home to check things out. I let Penelope, the maid of honor, know what was up. "Whaaat? Can't anyone else do it?" she said, but the Motorize family and I had a history, and since Ben Motorize had secluded himself William Cardinal had taken over the family affairs so I could see this being a bit of a problem. John was, in fact, constantly at odds with William Cardinal, an arrogant man who tended to abuse his power. It would just be faster if I went myself.

The Joestar mansion garden had been transformed into a wedding venue, and as I ducked through it I saw mum holding Joseph. I was pretty sure she saw me but I ignored that, hopped in my car, and headed for the Motorize manor.

Steven and Cardinal didn't exactly get along, either, and there was a strong possibility Cardinal had forced Steven to do something just to get at me, again. I reached the Motorize Manor, and saw Steven's car still there. Guess he made it home from the party last night just fine. Well, he'd been sipping his drinks quietly while my army buddies yucked it up, and hadn't seemed all that drunk when he'd said his goodbyes, so I'd figured he got home all

right.

I got out of the car, and headed for the door, regretting the fact that I was still dressed for the ceremony in my full-dress uniform. That smug bastard could be absolutely intolerable with anyone he considered beneath him, and might well pretend his hand slipped and spill tea or coffee on my uniform.

Well, if he did that to me today, I'd...maybe not say anything but Lisa Lisa sure as hell would.

I rang the doorbell. Normally Faraday would, without ever running, answer the door in mere moments, but today there was no sign of him. I tried knocking. Still no answer, so I tried the knob, and the door wasn't locked. I opened the door, and took a step in. "Hello? Good morning!" I called, but there was still no reply.

Weird, were they out? I didn't find that thought convincing, largely because I could sense someone in the house.

Someone? That seemed like the wrong word.

What was it? This awful feeling that had swept through me? "Steven? Hey, Steven Motorize! It's Jorge!"

Should I go to Steven's room upstairs? But when I set foot on the staircase, I froze in my tracks. The carpet was seeped in blood.

This was bad. And the blood wasn't dry at all...in fact, there was steam rising off it so it was very fresh indeed.

There was a thud from somewhere deeper in the manor, and something that sounded like a groan. This wasn't over yet. It was still happening, right now. ...damn it. I grabbed the poker from the fireplace at the back of the entrance lobby, and took a firm grip on it with both hands. The sound had come from upstairs. To the right from the top of the staircase. Darlington's bedroom was most likely on the right. Steven's was on the left, but...would he have a gun hidden in his room? I didn't know. Fuck it. I ran up the stairs.

I put my back to the wall, and peeked down the hallway to the right. At the back of the hall stood a girl, in pajamas, her head down. Covered in blood.

"Darlington!" I said, and stepped out in the hall, but was that Darlington? She was taller and skinnier than Darlington, and her hair hung straight down, no sign of Darlington's meticulous little curls. But I recognized that hair, and her figure.

The blood-stained girl raised her head when I stepped out into the hall. It was Kenton Motorize. As she'd been when she died fifteen years ago.

I stopped in my tracks, stunned, and Kenton said, "Blaargh."

She was a zombie...no, perhaps she had been for quite some time now.

While you were studying planes, Steven and my father have been studying ways to bring back the dead. And they found a place in South America that had stories about it, and found some sort of proof that some ritual had actually given life to the dead.

Darlington had told me that, but Steven had worked with Lisa Lisa and the Hamon warriors, so there was no way he'd ever let Kenton be turned into a zombie. He'd abandoned the idea the first time he encountered real zombies. Steven himself had said **I knew it would be an unforgivable sin to make Kenton into one of those horrible things.**

"Uh, Kenton...? How...?"

"Duhhh blaghhh blaghh ffaahh!" There was no meaning in her utterances, no trace of Kenton's mind left. Mouth hanging open, the zombie flung itself at me and I jammed the poker in its face with out a second's thought. Sorry! Goodbye, old friend. The girl who'd taught me about planes. I wanted to be like you; I wanted to fly like you did.

"Dunh!" the zombie yelped. The poker came out the back of the zombies head, and it stopped moving. She was dead again.

This wasn't Kenton, I told myself, again. And again. I let her frail body slump to the floor. Behind me, "Oh...what the...Jorge Joestar?" said William Cardinal, seated in a wheelchair. A gun pointed at me.

This was his fault. Steven would never make Kenton a zombie. But why would William Cardinal have done it?

Simple. Because he was an idiot. Not an ignorant kind of idiot, but the kind that should know better. He'd been attacked by zombies and suffered as a result, but the kind of doubled down idiot that idiotically try to find a way to use zombies anyway.

"You thought you could use Kenton in war, Cardinal?"

"Ha ha ha! Any true soldier would think the same...!"

He was also the long-winded type of idiot, so I knew he'd be unable to resist launching into a monologue. So the second he started to boast, I yanked the poker out of Kenton's head, swung it hard, and knocked the gun out of his hand. Crack! Schiiing...the gun hit the wall and slid away across the floor.

Cardinal looked surprised, and went silent. "Good," I said. "Not another word."

"It didn't hurt," he whispered.

".....?" Well, we both had our adrenaline up, I thought, my mind mostly trying to decide if the army or the police should be called to judge his actions. Or should I do that, right here and now? Then I noticed there was no blood coming out of the cut on his hand, and stopped thinking at all.

"Hunh? A wound this bad should hurt, shouldn't it? Joestar!" Cardinal yelled. He hadn't realized it yet. But he was one, too. A zombie.

But he was going to work every day as the commander of the air force...which necessitated working in the sunlight. So his exterior remained human flesh. Which meant...at this point, my legs started quivering. I asked – in Spanish – "Why do you hate me so much? What draws such loathing out of you?"

Antonio Torres' muffled Spanish echoed from the back of William Cardinal's throat. "It's how I get my kicks these days, balsa blanco. Heh heh heh. ...is what I'd like to say, but that's not it at all, nitwit! Who cares about you? I'm just doing what my boss tells me to! Although it's all the more fun when you happen to be involved!"

All the while there was this squelching crunching slurping sound going on, and Cardinal's skin was being pulled and twisted inward. He was clearly being eaten as we spoke. And Antonio's control over Cardinal's body was growing stronger.

I started backing down the hallway. As I passed Kenton's body, the door to the room was open, and inside I saw half-eaten bits of Steven and Ben and Darlington, but they weren't lying still, but twitching and pulsing. They were getting ready to rise again as zombies. My friends...!

"Pfft, hahh...you're a soldier, you know the boss's orders are absolute, right?" Antonio said, belching. "Today's your last day, *Jorge* Joestar. All that's left is for you to die."

Antonio pushed the chair's wheels forward with both hands, still wearing Cardinal. I kept backing up, but soon ran out of hall to back up into.

"I can't afford to die," I said.

I was getting married today. Not dying.

"You will die," Antonio said. "It's already decided. My boss said it was your destiny."

"You keep going on about this boss...who is it? Anyone a shitbag like you would follow can't be worth much."

"How dare you insult the boss!" Antonio roared. "A fucking insect like you has no right!"

Heh, I grinned. "Big talk considering how many of you I shot down in my plane. We aren't kids any more, Antonio; I'm done putting up with your shit. You fucking midget. You think you can beat me just cause I'm not flying a plane?"

"...I do, asshole. No way I'm losing barehanded."

Antonio tried to stand Cardinal up, but Cardinal had been in that wheelchair so long he didn't have the muscles left, and he just collapsed in a heap on the floor...and then slapped both hands down hard, flinging himself bodily into the air, caught the light fixture, and dangled from it. Zombies sure were strong. Meanwhile I had a poker. Was that enough? Cardinal's flesh looked pretty firm. How

deep would this poker really pierce? Hmm. I might be at a bit of a disadvantage, here.

But I had a bride waiting for me! The ribbons were in the way, so I tossed my uniform aside, took a firm grip on my poker, and got ready. Just facing up to Antonio Torres was enough to make tears well up. My legs were shaking. I was the one still dragging our childhoods around with me. Damn it! "C'mon! Antonio Torres! You bullied me every damn day! About time I got a turn!"

"Trying to sound tough?" Antonio sniggered, swinging from the light fixture. "Lisa Lisa's not coming to save you. Just watch."

Antonio jerked Cardinal's chin, pointing at the window. In the sky outside was another Antonio Torres, gliding like a flying squirrel. Two of them...three. No, even more. Close to the window I could tell.

A flock of flying squirrel Antonios was coming in from the coast. "You know how many there are?" Antonio asked.

"One flat ass zombie's as good as another."

Antonio ignored this. "About 920,000."

920,000!? I gaped at him, but Antonio'd been dead for twenty years, and if he'd been shedding to double his numbers every year, no matter how many of him we'd killed in the war he'd end up with that many.

"We've got all of England surrounded now! Today's the day! Our boss is taking over this entire country! Heh heh heh! Our boss promised me I could have Lisa Lisa. I'll be inside her next! I can eat her slowly from within. I'll leave her brain for last, so she can savor having her blood drained, her organs chewed, and her bones crunched. I can't wait! Heh heh heh!"

Desperate to shut him up, I swing the poker wildly, but all it did was make Cardinal's bald skull about half the size. He was already dead, so this failed to kill him again.

"No use!" Antonio said. "The boss said your death is set. Just accept it."

"I'm not dying!" I yelled, and swung the poker again.

Antonio caught it mid-swing, and shouted, "It's your fault Dar died!" but in Cardinal's voice. I looked again, and Cardinal's jaw was hanging open, his tongue out, but his face was toned like a living human, and the light was back in his eyes. "Jorge Joestar! It's all your fault! You brought death here! You're jinxed!"

Cursing me, Cardinal began swinging his arm wildly, still clutching the other end of my poker. I was flung through the air, and when I hit the floor I no longer had a weapon in my hand.

"Now it's over, *Jorge*," Antonio's voice returned, laughing. "Honestly, I never thought the day would come I'd kill you. I'd have laughed if you died, but I just liked seeing you cry and run when you saw me coming. I never really considered actually killing you. Heh heh. But what will be will be. This was our fate all along. It was decided long ago."

Antonio swung Cardinal's fist, and sent me flying. Wham! I hit my head hard on the opposite wall, and nearly passed out. For a brief moment I wondered if maybe I'd be better off if I did pass out here. Wouldn't that be easier? But I shook that thought off. I had Lisa Lisa and Joseph waiting for me. My friends and family, all gathered together in my home.

I'd followed the rules of the Church of England and had my banns read out three times. Now the big day was finally here! I had to get back to it!

"Heh heh heh! Well!?" Thwack! Antonio hit me in the side of the head with the poker he'd stolen from me. My head throbbed, but I ignored it, thinking furiously. "Resist! C'mon, *Jorge*! I thought you wanted to fight me! Wasn't this 'your turn'?"

Thwack!

Cardinal struck me across the back where I lay. But I just kept thinking, didn't respond at all. There was no way I'd win this in a straight up fist fight. And the excitement of the fight would stop me thinking at all. No point in fighting to lose.

Think! How could I survive this? Normally, Lisa Lisa would show up. But she wouldn't make it in time today. It was the busiest

day for a bride.

At this rate I would clearly be dead soon. If I was lay here waiting for Lisa Lisa to come running in her wedding dress, I'd die.

No. I couldn't leave this in her hands. I had to cast out the urge to just wait for her to save me. Don't make it Lisa Lisa's job to save your life! But what could I do? I was already half-dead.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! This is boring! God, you're pathetic, *Jorge!*" Antonio howled. "Can't you at least go out like a man!? Or are you gonna die like this!?"

I'm not going to die! But why was I still so convinced of that? Because I thought Tsukumojuku was going to appear out of nowhere and save me again?

I did. I mean, he'd said:

We'll meet again, one more time.

Cool. Then, could that be now? Come on!

But he didn't. Of course not. There was no sign of him coming at all. No sign...?

Fifteen years ago, when Tsukumojuku showed himself at the Motorize Manor, there'd been no 'signs' of him coming. So why had he come?

He'd said, **I'm here to help you.** He'd been there for me. He'd come if I needed him.

"Fuck it, then die! Heh heh! Your entire life was a waste! It was a waste of my time ever dealing with someone like you! You're such a worthless, pathetic fool that your very existence ruins the lives of everyone around you! You should never have been born!"

Tsukumojuku had also said this:

Your Beyond is making it happen.

Right. He'd talked like that a lot, about the power I had. **Beyond.** I'd completely forgotten about it again, but I remembered now. I had some sort of god on my side.

Believe in Beyond, and you will overcome your fate.

I remembered something else, now. Tom Petty's prophecy. **Master Tom Petty went and said something ridiculous about**

you dying around the time we get married, Lisa Lisa had said, and her fears had come to pass. I hadn't imagined it would actually be the day of, but anyway, I was destined to die here. But Tom Petty had said something else. **I dunno. Up to you.** That's right, this was up to me. **That god may not have made up its mind, either. But if you wish to go on living, you must follow that god.** There was no other way. If I was to survive this, I had to put my faith in this Beyond.

Okay. Let's believe. With my head all woozy from the hail of poker thwacks Antonio was unleashing on it.

"Arrghhhhh! You're this pointless without an airplane? Do you even have a cock!?! Been a while, but let's find out!" Antonio moved Cardinal's hand and pulled my trousers and underwear off but I just let him. I couldn't afford to waste energy resisting. Think. What did believing in Beyond entail?

It meant there was an author writing a story with me as the main character.

Then come on and save me! I thought, but I know there was a reason why they couldn't. Once Tsukumojuku had vanished and I was all alone I'd read a lot of novels, so I knew. Stories had plots, they had narrative flow, and you couldn't have things that didn't make sense or just showed up out of the blue.

I had to create the flow.

Beyond existed. That's why Tsukumojuku had come fifteen years ago. He'd come even though I didn't believe in Beyond at the time because...I thought about that for a minute, and decided it was to convince me that Beyond existed. And at the same time, teach me how to use Beyond.

"God damn, your ass is pale! Heh heh! Watch it bounce!" Antonio yelled, hitting me so hard with the poker half my cheek was torn off. "Just how soft is it!? What's it made of, gelatin!?! Look at it wobble!"

If I used Beyond, Tsukumojuku would come. What I needed was a way to use it. Think.

What narrative would allow him to come?

I remember the last thing he'd said to me.

The nature of my name suggests that we'll meet again, one more time.

Right. His name? Come to think of it, fifteen years ago he'd said some nonsense about his name.

Tsukumojuku.

Tsukumojuku is 9, 10, 9, 10, 9.

My name has three all-powerful gods linked together by two crosses.

The name of God.

Right. Because he had the name of God he'd come for me again. But why had it put it like that? What was there to his name? There must be something.

There must be a meaning to that 'all-powerful god' and 'cross'.

I remembered that I'd borrowed a Japanese dictionary from Tsukumojuku once and flipped through it a bit.

"Argh! Show me your cock! Heh heh heh! What the...that ain't your cock! What the hell! Grown-up cocks are gross! That's disgusting! I'm gonna puke!" Antonio shrieked, and warm vomit splattered down on my exposed crotch. Chewed up bits of William Cardinal's insides.

Japanese characters don't just symbolize sounds. They also show meaning, and there's breadth to that meaning. This breadth is why 九 could mean '9' and 'omnipotent god.' And why 十 could be '10' and a 'cross'. The shape of the kanji was a metaphorical symbol. In Japanese, you could manipulate that meaning to 'convey' that one thing was another. Force open a path, and allow meaning to pass down it.

So back to Tsukumojuku. 九十九十九. Him giving me that dictionary when he left felt like the work of Beyond to me. It let me understand. I was extremely glad I'd learned just how broad the meaning of Japanese words could be.

Japanese used kanji. Kanji had several different readings.

The kanji 九 had three readings. "Kyu", "Kokono", and "Ku."

The kanji 十 had five. "Ji~", "Juu", "Shuu", "To", and "Too". "Kokono" and "Too" sounded like "Here" and "Far".

Here, far, here, far, here.

A name that started 'here', went 'far' away twice, and then came back.

"Shit! Your dick made me throw up!" Antonio yelled, and raised the poker, but I'd made it in time. I'd been trying to focus on thinking but I'd been panicking on the inside. Fortunately, I'd done it.

He went far away, and came back twice. After he vanished in America, he'd come back once in the Motorize Manor, and vanished again. So he'd come back once more. Here.

"That's right."

And there he was, still fifteen years old, standing by my side and looking down at me. "At last you decided to believe in Beyond, Jorge," Tsukumojuku said. "It took you getting this bloody? You sure are a troublesome protagonist." He bent down, and took my shoulders. "What?" Antonio said. "Tsukumojuku Kato!? Why are you still young!?" He attacked, but his swing met only air.

"Eh?" I said. "We're not going back to the wedding?"

Tsukumojuku looked sorry. "You've got another role to play. But don't worry, it's a role your Beyond prepared for you. Although that doesn't guarantee it'll lead to a happy ending."

"Uh...then what's the point?"

"Don't worry! You'll find the meaning yourself!"

"Oh, come on! So...where are we?"

Tsukumojuku and I were standing in some foreign land. Not anywhere in Europe. I could see a cluster of houses in the distance that were nice-looking, sturdily constructed, but not anything you'd see in Europe. The green crops growing in square-cut, farm-like plots of mud were clearly not wheat.

"This is Japan," Tsukumojuku said. "A country town called Morioh. Although at the moment, it is floating upside-down in the Pacific."

I had no idea what that last bit meant, but the rest came as quite a surprise. "Japanese!? Why are we *here*!?"

"Because your role is to be played here."

"Wow, Japan...it's a beautiful country."

"Thank you. I believe you're here to solve a mystery."

"Hunh? What kind?"

"Murder. I'm the victim. It's all yours, buddy."

".....!? Hunh!? What...."

"Meeting you and being your friend has been an honor. I'm proud of you, Jorge Joestar. The world to come is in your hands!"

And with that, Tsukumojuku vanished into thin air, or I woke from a waking dream. I wasn't sure which. Either way the instant he was gone the brightly lit Morioh landscape went black as pitch, and I found myself lying on a cold night road, with neither stars nor moon in the sky above. My body was covered in blood from the beating Antonio Torres gave me. My skull was fractured, and chunks of flesh had been torn from my back and ass. I was in a hell of a state.

Barely alive, but alive.

Antonio and his Cardinal suit were killed by Lisa Lisa, once she arrived.

Kenton and the other zombies had been abducting and eating neighbors, and the house was filled with leftover bits of flesh and blood, and they found my uniform torn to pieces, so they were all convinced I'd died.

Lisa Lisa cried.

But not just Lisa Lisa, Penelope was crying too, and furious, so when 920,000 Antonios surrounded Great Britain, Penelope unleashed her fury and created a locked room. The locked room was made from the flying squirrel Antonios hovering over the bluffs, and the giant wall made from torn up bits of them surrounded the whole of Great Britain. "How dare you! You'll pay for this! I swear it!" Penelope screamed, her rage targeting the entire world. It may have looked like the wall made of Antonio was surrounding England, but it wasn't. Penelope had made a locked room that surrounded all of the world that wasn't England. The 920,000 Antonios that Penelope fused into a giant wall began to gobble up the world.

Chapter 14
Desolation Row

廃墟の街

The journey from Mars complete, all we had left to do was calculate the trajectory and land in the water, and I'd figured since we were landing smack in the middle of The Ocean we'd be totally fine but Morioh was waiting for us and we slammed straight into the Arrow Cross House, so whoops, too bad, we're all dead. Or so I thought but when I woke up I was there, alive, and Narancia and Pucci were waking up too looking surprised they'd both survived and I could tell the stuff around us wasn't the space ship but Cars turned into a sphere. Like a small version of the Eyed Balloon. Cars made a tear in the round walls, and we stepped out and it was either dusk or dawn cause it was chilly and dimly lit and there were stars and the moon in the sky. About half the sky was bright and half was dark. I looked for the North star. I found Cassiopeia and the Big Dipper, and then the North Star. The bright half of the sky was West, so this must be evening. Under the starry sky was an unfamiliar countryside, hilly, but no mountains, like Morioh but not the same. Wheat fields, not rice paddies. The houses I could see in the distance weren't Japanese style but brick and stone, like old European landscapes. Then a gust of wind blew by and I caught of whiff of something sweet and turned around. Remnants of the spaceship were stuck to the outside of the Cars sphere, and Cars' flesh was melting, smoke rising off it, making a bubbling noise. And the smell wasn't that of animal flesh burning, but weirdly sweet, like fruit.

"Cars, you OK there?" I asked, and Cars slowly returned to humanoid form, but had clearly taken quite a bit of damage. He wasn't steady on his feet.

"The extra mes covering the ship burned up just above the surface," he said, hoarsely. "Seems we were one me short."

But he couldn't exactly have just waited one more loop and obtained another extra Cars.

And in this thirty-seventh universe, I met an astronaut

named Funnier Valentine, Cars had said. So even as the universe looped itself there were things that happened every time and things that didn't.

"No, 36 should have been enough," Enrico Pucci unilaterally declared. Don't think the number 36 will just work everywhere forever, I thought, but Pucci was lost in thought and didn't even glance my way.

Then I realized; Pucci was hung up on the idea of 36 souls. I could hear him muttering to himself.

"It wouldn't have worked without 36. 36 is 12×3 . 12 and 3 are both holy numbers in Christianity."

The code in the Way to Heaven had clearly possessed Pucci.

Have the courage to cast aside your Stand, and as your Stand withers, it will gather 36 souls, and give birth to something new.

It will befriend he who says the fourteen words.

The place is 28.24 degrees North, 80.36 degrees West.

As far as the first phrase went, the only part of that that had happened was the number 36. Thirty-six Cars were assembled, but that wasn't because anyone had thrown away a Stand. The ultimate thing had simply survived the death of the universe 36 times. And nothing 'new' had been born.

As far as the Fourteen Words, these did seem to be lining up.

"Spiral staircase"

"Rhinoceros beetle"

"Desolation Row"
"Fig tart"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Via Dolorosa"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Singularity"
"Giotto"
"Angel"
"Hydrangea"
"Rhinoceros beetle"
"Singularity"
"Secret Emperor"

From this list, Pucci had clearly chosen to interpret Morioh and Nero Nero Island moving as 'rhinoceros beetles', and that made sense to me. They seemed to have pretty burly legs, and though they'd split open, they'd started out with those barriers on their back, armored. But if the phrase 'rhinoceros beetle' showed up four times, were there two other moving islands out there?

I was also on board with calling our falling on the Arrow Cross House "Via Dolorosa". And because we'd fallen there, we were still alive, I guess?

Giotto was clearly the probes Cars had made his ship out of. Otherwise...?

I went back through events, and understood why Pucci had reacted to what Cars said. Cars had described the Earth as a water vessel, which was the etymology of the word 'hydrangea'.

28.24 degrees North, 80.36 degrees West was the location on Mars where we'd found Cars. So considering all these symbols,

it made sense that the Way to Heaven involved making friends with Cars, but did it really? The Ultimate Thing viewed us as food, so *could* we be friends? I couldn't imagine it, and the scale of his every action was petrifying, but he *had* protected us from burning up on reentry. The idea was only just starting to settle in, since I hadn't expected him to do anything like that, but saving us had come at no small sacrifice. He was standing bolt upright, his legs slightly apart, and the burns covering his body were visibly healing. A pus was squirting out of the wounds with an oozing, popping noise, and when it hit the ground it sizzled and evaporated.

"Yikes, that looks painful. Anything we can do?" I asked, but he ignored me. Clearly, there was nothing I could do. But I said, "Thanks for saving us," anyway.

"Oh, yeah!" Narancia said. "You saved our asses! Thanks, dude! But why did you save us?"

Focused on healing himself, Cars did not deign to respond.

"Yo," Narancia said, turning to me. "Maybe we should run for it right now. Seems like he ain't moving."

"? Run? Where to?"

"Where Buccellati is."

"Narancia, look around you. This isn't Morioh or Nero Nero Island."

"Hunh?" He spun around, flustered. "Uh...hunh? Seriously? Where the fuck are we?"

"I dunno."

"But we fell right on top of Morioh and Nero Nero Island! I saw them!"

"Yeah, so did I." Specifically, we'd fallen right on top of the Arrow Cross House. So what had happened?

Where had we ended up this time?

Narancia dropped a few hundred tiny Das Boots on the grass, and sent them out in all directions to scout. Which reminded

me that I was still borrowing a Das Boot from Cars, so I did the same thing.

"Unlike Mars, there's trees and grass! So nice! I ♥ Earth!" Narancia crowed. He had a point. The sky above us was the same sunset I'd seen all my life; the moon was bright, the stars were twinkling, and the countryside around us might be unfamiliar, but was comfortingly real. We could breathe without spacesuits, and the gravity didn't make our movements heavy or light. This was Earth. So what about it was bugging me so much? "I'm going in the houses, but there's nobody there," Narancia said, peering into his headset periscope. "Every house is empty. What the...? Oh, a town sign. Mm? Is this English? Wa...was...wast..."

"Lemme see," I said, and kinda snatched the periscope off Narancia.

There was a dirt road that crossed a grassy creek via a stone bridge, and right in front of it was a wooden sign, painted green, that read "Wastewood." "Wastewood? Well, that does sound like English. Is this America somewhere?" But American countryside didn't look like this. America would have paved roads so the cars could drive easier. The rivers would have flood control. The bridges would be concrete or at least have guardrails. But I saw no signs of any government work like that. Were we just that deep in the country? But did anywhere still look like this, these days? There were wheat fields and homes. If people used the roads, they'd have to pave them so cars could use them...but as I looked through the periscope, I figured out the reason. One Das Boot found a large manor, and entered the grounds. There was indeed a car sitting in the driveway, but it was a classic car. Like in a Sherlock Holmes movie. Like they'd taken the horses off a rich man's carriage, and added four small tires. It matched the styling on the old manor, but it looked well-used for something a hobbyist kept. Like someone had just dumped it there. I got close, and this went beyond poorly

maintained; it looked to have been straight up abandoned there, at the mercy of the elements. The entire body was covered in a thick layer of dust; I couldn't even see in through the square windows. But it didn't look like it had been left there a century ago, either.

"Can't find anybody," Narancia said, looking at the periscope over my shoulder.

"Yeah. But it doesn't see like the place was abandoned a hundred years or anything."

"A hundred years?"

"Look, see?"

I showed him a view from a different Das Boot, one that was looking into a small shop. It was a general store, and the packaging on everything was antique. And there were newspapers on sale by the door. The Das Boot was parked next to them, close in on the title and date. The Daily Mirror. November 11th, 1920.

That was 92 years ago. Were these really for sale? But the paper looked real, and so did everything else in the shop. There was a reality to the details.

"Woah," Narancia said. "1920? How many years ago is that? Um...it's 2012, so... $20-12=8$ and $20-19=1$ so 18 years ago! Before I was born!"

One should not become a gangster so young, I thought. "92 years ago."

"Fuck how!?" Narancia flew into a rage, but I was used to it by now. I ignored him and began checking other Das Boots. There were Das Boots riding fish and birds, and I saw a lot of animals besides humans. They all seemed to be doing just fine. Only the humans had gone missing.

One riding...I guess a butterfly? I could see big white wings flapping on the sides of the screen, and it was bobbing up and

down in the air as it flew. Anyway, it went in through the window of a home. Old art deco style furniture, and dishes on the table. Like they'd been eating a moment ago. Breakfast? They'd been eating a simple meal of bread and soup and coffee, but the people eating here had left more than a few minutes ago. These dishes had to have been there at least a month. The bread in the basket was almost all eaten by bugs, soup had dried in the bowls, the half-boiled vegetables rotting. The inside of the coffee cups was stained pitch black. What could have happened that caused the people living here to leave their dishes on the table, and never come back? The butterfly the Das Boot was riding fluttered further into the house when Narancia said, "Hey, Jorge, your name's Jorge Joestar, right?"

"...? Yes. Why?"

"Congratulations."

"What for?"

"Look." I peered over at Narancia's screen, and saw a huge garden outside a large manor, with rows of tables and chairs, white ribbons and crosses hung everywhere. Also quite a lot of what had once been flowers. There were glasses and bottles on the tables. Like they'd been left there, not after the party, but, based on how little of the wine had been drunk, since before the party began. Beyond the tables was a white carpet running down the center, with rows of chairs lined up on either side, and an altar at the front. This was obviously a wedding venue, a wedding that had never taken place. In the dim evening light the abandoned party setup looked deeply forlorn. Near the garden entrance was some sort of welcome board, and as the bird Das Boot was riding passed by it, I had just enough time to read it. It read:

Welcome to the Wedding Reception for Jorge Joestar and

Elizabeth Straits.

"Eh heh heh. See? Something to look forward to, eh?"

While Narancia yucked it up, I remembered something.

In my world, there is another Jorge Joestar.

That Jorge spelled his name the same way I preferred, so I figured right away that this was the Jorge Joestar Tsukumojuku had talked about.

Tsukumojuku had come from 1904, from a world with a weirdo map. So was this La Palma? No, the Canary Islands were Spanish, so I doubt there was anywhere named Wastewood there, and the English only welcome board made little sense either. Since this other Jorge Joestar was a pure-bred Englishman, perhaps this was England? As I thought, the bird Das Boot was riding flew away from the house out of the front gate, and I saw a post box outside. There was a name written it; Joestar. This must be Jorge Joestar's family home, and he'd been planning to get married in the garden. So perhaps there were more things belonging to this other Jorge inside the house. I wasn't sure what checking those out would tell us, but I was curious.

"Narancia, I'd like to head to this Jorge Joestar's house."

"Hunh? Fuck yeah! Let's do this! Ain't accomplishing shit just standing around here!"

I turned towards Cars. Behind him Pucci seemed to have just become aware of his surroundings. "Where...is this? What happened?"

"We aren't sure yet," I said. "But it's possible we've gone back in time. Speed is a big factor in time travel, so maybe the ship's falling speed was a little too fast." As I said it, I remembered that the speeds required would be close to light speed, and the air resistance on reentry would be so great that we'd never get

anywhere close to that. Our speed was slow enough we'd have landed safely if we'd touched down in the ocean. So what *had* happened? I wondered if Cars had used some power, but guessing out loud wasn't going to get us anywhere. "Anyway, if we've time traveled, it's 1920, and...we appear to be in England. In a town called Wastewood."

I waited to see if he reacted at all to this; after all, England was a myth, and was not supposed to actually exist. But Pucci just nodded. "I see. Then we should head for the capital, London."

"? Why?"

"Something waits for us in 'Desolation Row'," Pucci said, with great but unsubstantiated conviction.

London? I still wasn't sure the place actually existed, but we definitely needed to start moving, either way. We'd definitely fallen on Morioh, but instead we found ourselves wherever this Wastewood was. There was an entrance in Morioh, and the exit lay here. If we found that exit, maybe we could get back.

Narancia interrupted this chain of thought. "Mm? Hunh? Found someone." He was staring at my screen, so I took a look, and the butterfly from earlier had fluttered into a storehouse or closet or basement or I dunno, a dark room of some sorts, and in the center of it stood three people. They were all men, and looked pretty beat up. There were rips in their old-fashioned shirts and pants, and one's entire ass was exposed. The three of them were standing stock still in the center of the room, their faces very close together. Were they discussing something secret? But as the butterfly got closer, I could tell – it wasn't three men, but three men and a little girl, about five years old, and the three strong men all had their teeth sunk in her neck, leaving the rest of her dangling in the air, hiding her until we were right up close. "What in the

name of fuck!?" Narancia yelled. I was pretty shocked myself.

All three men had their eyes closed, but the man on the right swallowed, and the other two men twitched, and tried to pull the girl towards them. The man who'd swallowed wasn't about to give her up, and pulled back. Since all three men were fighting to sink their teeth in her neck I got a good look at them; their mouths were filled with fangs, sunk deep into the body of the little girl. Three men were fighting to eat this kid. Another one swallowed, so it seemed safe to assume they were drinking her blood.

But they weren't just gulping away, so perhaps the three of them were taking their time, not wanting to waste her? After all, there was nobody else in town.

"Shit! Load up!" Narancia yelled. "Fire! Shoot them!"

Psst psst psst, three cruise missiles shot out of the Das Boot, leveled out, and hit each of the men in the head, thwack thwack thwack. Their heads split open but no blood or brains came out. The girl fell to the ground in the middle, and looked for all the world like she was already dead, but...

It's like a zombie movie. The dead bite people, and those bit or who come in contact with their saliva turn and attack other humans, Shiobana had said. No way, I thought, and a moment later the girl stood up, her eyes showing only whites. Her little mouth opened wide enough her cheeks split, showing an awful lot of fangs.

"...what the...that's not human!" Narancia shrieked.

"It's a zombie," I said.

"A zombie!?"

"Narancia. Shoot the kid."

"Ehh? I can't do that!"

"Then Narancia, bring your Das Boots back here."

"Uhh..."

"Quick." I'd just cottoned on to our surroundings. There

were figures standing in the wheat fields around us. All I could make out was their silhouettes in the darkness, but they were shaped like people. But they didn't feel like people. Things that looked human but weren't were staring at us. We were already surrounded.

"Hurry!" I hissed, but I guess they heard me, because the shadows around us all started closing in, and we could soon see the drool running down their chins, the nasty bared fangs.

"The dead are walking..." Pucci said. "The end of the world draws nigh."

Brushing off his dire words, I called back my Das Boots, and let out a hail of missiles, roaring into the explosions. Zombie after zombie exploded. Narancia's Das Boots joined us, and we took out nearly all the zombies, but two made it through the fields and were right on top of us.

"Augh...argghhhhh...aghhhh!" Horrible groans and horrible fangs and our missiles weren't gonna be in time but just before they got us Pucci's White Snake punched each one in the head so hard it split open.

"The end of the world is but the prelude to the arrival of Heaven," Pucci said. *That* was ominous.

More zombies were gathering.

Narancia gathered his Das Boots and formed a big one, and we climbed in. Cars was still looming in place, emitting smoke, and when I suggested we get him on board Narancia looked reluctant, but Pucci insisted, "We need all elements gathered so far. We can't afford to leave anything behind."

This astronaut was sounding more and more like a prophet. But apparently saying things with no discernible basis but oodles of confidence was the trick to overruling Narancia, like he assumed

there must be some reason beyond his comprehension or no one would act like that, and just went along with it. The boy had no faith in his own ability to think through things or work things out, and thus was easily dragged into the flow of forceful personalities. So I put my own oar in, too.

"For the same reason, we'll need to check out this Joestar manor."

At this, not just Pucci, but Cars, who'd been so busy healing he hadn't even adjusted his gaze all this while, turned and looked at me.

"Joestar manor?"

Hunh? Uh-oh, I thought, but I soon switched to 'oh well' instead.

I was feeling much the same way as Pucci was.

Everything has meaning.

Narancia's Das Boot took us through a meadow and some woods before we reached the Joestar manor. I hopped out of the sub and checked the mailbox. This was definitely the Joestar home. Then we sailed into the garden, knocking tables and chairs aside, did a circuit of the main building, parked outside the entrance, and I hopped out again, went up on the porch, and peered inside through the window nearest the front door. I was super careful while peeping, worried that there were a bunch of vampiric zombies clustered inside. The lofty entrance was empty, but I thought I saw someone moving down the back hallway. I reached my hand out to the door, and knocked. But there was no response. "Hello?" I called, softly, but aloud. No reply.

I sensed someone behind me – Narancia, I figured – and turned around to receive quite a shock.

The figure behind me had its face painted white, green

stars around its eyes, larger lips painted over its actual lips, and brightly colored clothes. It was a clown.

"Who are youuuuu!?" the clown shrieked, in high-pitched English. As it did, there was a huge racket as the front porch came apart like a tornado struck it, but instead of falling the bits combined in mid-air forming a wall leading to the porch roof. Beyond the porch wreckage wall, I could hear Narancia screaming, "Jooooorge! What are you doing!? Ruuuun!"

I was too surprised by the clown to react in time, and the walls were already closed around me. Locked in here, in the dark, face to face with a clown. Uh...

Narancia started trying to break down the walls imprisoning me, and I gave it a kick or two and tried ripping bits of wood off with my hands, but I didn't get anywhere. In fact, I could no longer reach the walls. Before I knew it a rope made of the same wood bits as the walls had dropped down from the ceiling, wrapped itself around my neck, pulled tight, and was pulling at me, trying to drag me off the floor and strangle me.

The clown laughed. "If you're not Penelope's friend, you'll have to hang yourself!"

Penelope? A girl's name?

A clown. A locked room.

The noose on my neck pulled me high enough off the ground my feet couldn't reach the floor, and was getting very tight around my throat, but those two keywords jobbed my memory. "Stop! I'm not the Locked Room Maestro!" I yelled. The clown took a close look at my face.

Thought so. "Unh...Ja...Javier Cortez...is... Javier Cortez is

dead!"

The Spanish police on La Palma beat him to death with their nightsticks, and sank his body in the sea at night.

It was like the soul left the clown's body. His whole body went stiff, then began to spin faster and faster until it exploded, and the walls around me and the rope on my neck went with it. The floor of the porch collapsed. As I sat there coughing, I heard footsteps come running. The front door was flung open, and a Latin beauty came out.

"Jorge!?" she said, looking around, and without thinking, I said, "Here!"

But when her gaze found me she looked very perplexed.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "My name's Jorge Joestar."

"Don't be ridiculous!" she said, fixing me with a furious glare. She was clearly looking for the other Jorge, Tsukumojuku's friend.

"I'm not, I swear! Penelope, right?" She'd been the one controlling that clown, then. I took my wallet out of my back pocket, pulled out a business card, and handed it to her. My name was written on it, and not using the spelling on my passport or other official documents.

Jorge Joestar
Detective

"? What do you mean, detective? Are you a cop?"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "The kind that inevitably ends up solving the mystery."

"? What are you talking about?"

"Have you not read Sherlock Holmes?" Was this the real England? Had Conan Doyle not made the place up, after all?

"Oh...but why...you're a Chinaman, aren't you?"

"...Japanese, but I'm an English citizen."

"Japan...oh...are you friends with Tsukumojuku, then?"

At the mention of his name every cell in my body shivered. I knew it. There was the world Tsukumojuku had come from. And after Tsukumojuku had left, something very strange had happened on this island. "I am," I said. "By the way, what in the hell is happening here? I mean, are you OK? Are you the only one here? Alive, I mean." As I was asking, Narancia yelled over me, "Hey, Jorge! Who is she?" in Italian, and Penelope's attitude changed dramatically.

"I am the only one here. I have no idea what is happening. You need not concern yourself with me. Please leave." And with that, she tried to shut the door. Clearly she did not want to invite strangers in, but from behind her came a gentle voice.

"Penelope."

A woman stepped into view, and the moment I saw her it felt as if the air around me had grown thin, and yet a strange warmth swept over me at the same time. Physics suggested if the air pressure dropped, so would the temperature, and yet...wait, that was irrelevant. Anyway, this woman was about forty years old, beautiful, and possessed of the sort of sincerity that ensured you'd feel horribly guilty if you ever betrayed or tricked her, a sort of solemnity that instantly stressed me out, but at the same time made you feel that if she was handling things, everything would work out just fine in the end.

"Erina..." Penelope said.

"Let me greet our guests, at least," Erina replied. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Erina Joestar. You're Jorge Joestar?"

She was just standing in front of me, but her class and elegance had me breathless. I took far too long to answer. "Um, yes."

"You seem awfully young. If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

"Er, sixteen."

"Would you perhaps be Japanese?"

"Um, yes. Sorry, I keep stammering, I'm not usually this nervous meeting people."

"Ha ha ha, that's quite all right. Please, be at ease."

No, even your gentle chuckles are bowling me over here, no way I can relax.

Behind me, Narancia was growing irritated. "Dude, stop fucking around! You learn anything from them yet?" God, he was rude. I went bright red.

"Heh, your companion is certainly a lively one." Erina said, glancing over my shoulder.

"Who the fuck is this granny? It's fuck dangerous around here! You bringing her with us or not? Make up your fucking mind!"

"God damn it, Narancia! Shut up!" I yelled, wheeling around...and there were three zombies running up behind him that he hadn't noticed. "Look..." out, I began, but before I got the words out snap snap snap three phone booth sized boxes popped up and swallowed the zombies. These boxes were made from the dirt and grass in the yard. Just like the locked room that had swallowed me was made from the front porch. I caught Penelope's eye, and she just sniffed huffily. Scary, but a little bit cute. "These grounds are completely safe. But those things do keep trying."

By those things, she must mean the zombies, but just what was happening inside those boxes? Was a clown appearing inside each of them to hang the zombies? I glanced around and there

were several other booths dotted around the garden, some fully intact, others crumbling, with holes in them, or only the bottom of the walls remaining. Through the holes I could see what lay inside, and there was a zombie hanging from a noose, but there was nothing below the zombie's neck. Penelope saw me looking and said, "They struggle after being hung, so they rip their own heads off." No sooner were the words out of her mouth than three splats came from the new booths. "Yikes!" Narancia yelped.

"See? But I'd prefer Erina not see that sort of thing. Would you please go now? Hmph, such weird clothes."

I looked back at Erina. "Excuse me. How did you know I was Japanese?"

"I've been running a trading company for some time now. I've done business with Japanese people in the past. Based on the inflections in your English, and...perhaps your facial features? You have a soft smile that's very particular to Japanese culture."

"I do? I mean, I guess people do say I look like an idiot."

She chuckled. "And I knew a boy about your age. I believe he called himself a detective as well."

"Yeah...I assume you mean Tsukumojuuku?"

"Yes. He was friends with my son. Perhaps his only friend, at the time. So they were always together in middle school. We lived in the Canary Islands then, but that boy had to return to Japan quite suddenly, and my son was already quite upset by that when we learned that his ship had capsized. We kept the news from him for a while, but...if you know Tsukumojuuku, then did he not die after all?"

Well, not in the ship crash. "No."

"Where are you from?"

How should I answer that? From Morioh? From Mars? Um. "Tsukumojuuku had family in Japanese Fukui Prefecture, in a small town called Nishi Akatsuki. I live there, too. It's quite far away. But I

met Tsukumojuku there, and quite a lot happened, and now I'm here." Really a lot had happened.

"Quite a lot?" Erina echoed. Perhaps she picked up on the scale of things, though I doubted she could have known their full measure.

"Yeah."

"But you did not arrive here by any ordinary means."

"...no, we didn't. Um, sorry, I forgot to ask but...how is it that the dead come to walk around attacking the living?"

"We still don't know the reason. But I supposed that is for me and you and your friends to figure out."

"....."

"Jorge Joestar, do you believe in destiny?" Erina asked, looking me right in the eye.

"Yes," I said, unable to suppress a smile at what I was about to say. "I not only believe in destiny, I make a living from doing so." Anyone calling themselves a detective did.

Erina gave me that lovely laugh of hers again. "Well said. Jorge Joestar from very far away, I am glad that we met."

"Um, yeah. Oh, sorry, I'm...aaaugh."

"Ha ha ha."

"Um, excuse me?" Penelope said.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Where are you going and what are you going to do there?"

"Hunh? Well...apparently this is England, so we were talking about going to London."

"What for?"

"I'm not really sure, but we're looking for Desolation Row. Kinda seems like anyone still living will have fled London, too."

"Desolation Row?"

"Yes."

"Why are you looking for that?"

Why were we? I wasn't sure, maybe just the narrative flow lead us to it? I laughed at the idea. We were finding Pucci's metaphors one after another, and using them to guide us. I couldn't offer any other explanation for our situation, and I couldn't help but laugh at that. "We're looking for the Way to Heaven. Ha ha ha."

"The Way to Heaven!?" Erina said.

I was surprised by her surprise. I wondered if this mess, with all the zombies, made that line sound like suicide. "No, I'm sure it's nothing all that serious..." I said, trying to cover.

"Well...I know this is coming out of the blue," Penelope said. "But can I come with you? You came from far away, right? I can protect you, I'm sure. Erina, I'm sorry. Do you mind if I go? My clowns will still protect the manor even if I'm gone, and I'll come back as fast as I can."

Hunh? But zombies weren't that big a threat. We didn't really need a girl to come protect us, I thought, but then rethought it; perhaps this was another important narrative being introduced.

But Erina looked dubious. "You're a girl, after all."

"But..."

"Mmm..."

"...But Lisa Lisa...Elizabeth is already..." Penelope suddenly sounded like she was about to cry. "I...I do hate to put it like this, Erina, but if I stay where it's safe just because I'm a girl and it's scary and dangerous then I feel like I'll just wind up left behind by all the boys. Elizabeth puts herself in danger, and nearly dies, but in the end she got to be with Jorge when it really mattered! She was happy, I know it!"

This seemed to strike a nerve with Erina, and she thought hard on it.

Penelope turned to me. "I know it's a sudden request, but take me with you. I promise I won't get in the way."

Hmm. "It's dangerous? You probably shouldn't?"

"I know it's dangerous."

"But..."

"Please. And this whole mess is, in a large part, my fault. So I'd like to see if there's anything I can do about it."

Her fault...? "You made the zombies?"

"I wouldn't do that! But I did turn the entire island of Great Britain into a locked room."

"Hunh....!?" The sheer scale of that statement left me at a loss for words. But at the same time, then she was definitely the cause of this state of affairs, I thought. "Then I guess you have a right to be involved." But holy hell, how big was this locked room? "Even so, I'd really advise against it..." I added. "I'm traveling with some pretty weird people."

"But you're with them, too? Don't worry, I can look after myself."

The Ultimate Thing ignored basically everything that passed for common sense with humans, though...

"I just can't agree, Penelope," Erina said. "It's too risky."

Penelope wasn't having it. "I'm going. Erina, thank you for everything. I was very happy. But I can't take it any more. With Jorge gone, there's something dark and hot and heavy churning around inside my chest and stomach and down below, chewing away at me from the inside. If I don't hang every last zombie in England that churn is gonna eat me alive."

"...Penelope..."

"So please. I won't demand your approval, but at the least, don't stop me."

".....!"

"Ha ha. But I promise I'm coming back! Coming back alive! At the very least I'll bring Elizabeth back with me. I'm not about to be the only one sitting around biding my time! Ah ha ha!"

Even her laugh was choked with tears. Erina put her arms around Penelope, and drew her close. "Then go, Penelope. Just be sure you come back. I can't lose any more family!"

"Mm! I'll come back safe and sound. Sorry, this means you'll have to look after Joseph all by yourself, I know."

"Joseph will be fine. Straits and the others come to check on us from time to time." And like that, we'd gained a new companion, but...Joseph?. "Joseph Joestar?"

Both women turned and stared at me as one.

I had them show me baby Joseph Joestar. There was a baby carriage in the room just off the entrance hall, and he was sleeping inside. His father was Jorge, and his mother Lisa Lisa/Elizabeth Joestar. So he might be a Joseph Joestar, but not the same one who was my adopted great-grandfather. That Joseph Joestar's father was Jodoh, and his mother was Maria Urias Zeppeli. But I felt like there was some resemblance. Something inherently rascally to him. Even as a baby.

But most likely, this baby would become the man who went up against the Ultimate Cars this time, and sent him to the ends of space. He was a newborn, and already a bad ass. I grinned at the thought, but I had other fish to fry.

"Hmm, so this is Joseph as a baby. You can already see it in his face," Cars said, leaning in beside me. His wounds were totally healed.

I froze to the spot, my mind utterly blank. Erina and Penelope both threw themselves between the half-naked man and the baby, protectively.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! Fear not! I do not make a habit of killing children! And because this man sent me to me every time I am here before you! Besides, if I harmed him who knows how history

would be altered! Come, let us return to the place and time from whence we came, Jorge Joestar!" Cars said, and walked away. I was so relieved. My knees were rattling.

"What was that!? What is he!?" Penelop said, tears in her eyes. "I never saw him come in!"

"That's...one of my traveling companions," I said. "You sure you're up for traveling with a half-naked mystery man?"

I definitely thought she shouldn't, but Penelope swallowed once, loudly, and said, "I'll be fine." She paused, then added, "But he's very scary."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm scared of him, too."

Then I took Penelope de la Roza back to Das Boot. Narancia was hanging out inside, looking bored, and when he saw us he yelled, "Yo, what the fuck, you picked up a girl? Here? Now!? Are you completely stupid!? Are you fucked in the head?" He cackled wildly but I ignored him. Cars and Pucci were waiting inside, too, so I introduced Penelope to them, and explained that she was joining us on our trip to London, but neither of them seemed particularly interested. Pucci simply glanced at her face once, and went back to whatever he was thinking about it, so I let it be.

"OK, motherfuckers! Let's go!" Narancia yelled, but I was the only one who yelled, "Yeah! Let's go!" back.

"So, aren't you 'companions'? Why's the mood so tense?" Penelope asked. Right, I'd better fill her in.

"Penelope, you met him a moment ago, but this is Cars. He's the Ultimate Living Being. And the gentleman in the space suit is the astronaut, Enrico Pucci."

"Nice to meet you," Penelope said, but neither reacted. "This is a little uncomfortable," she whispered, but there was not much I could do to change that.

But when Penelope explained what was happening here in England, Pucci's expression changed dramatically. Penelope told us of Jorge Joestar's life, of the fifteen locked room mysteries created by the Locked Room Maestro, Javier Cortez. She told us about her power to turn any material into a locked room, manifest a clown within to hang anyone trapped inside and make it look like a suicide. "Jorge Joestar called powers like this Wounds. They are abilities born of pain inflicted over and over again."

I remembered what Cars had said about the bow and arrow he'd made.

In theory...to protect their own lives from the fatal wound, their talents would blossom, the energy would heal the wounds, and they would discover special abilities previously hidden within them.

A wound – being damaged – could give you powers beyond what others had. What did it mean to recover, to heal?

As a body attempted to heal itself, it must want to avoid suffering the same injury again, and provide a tool to protect itself. In that sense, both Stands and Wounds were a manifestation of inner emotions.

Emotions given form.

Thinking about this and listening to Penelope, she got to the mass suicide in the church on La Palma. The pictures of the mothman drawn while on fire. "It took ten years for Jorge to find out," Penelope said, "But when humans are imagining something out of anxiety or fear, what they imagine remains behind, collects, haunts, and can even take on concrete form. That's how there can be a spider with gorilla legs lurking in the darkness underground, how people can die painting pictures of the mothman on land, and why gremlins appear in the air."

Gremlins? Like Mogwai and them? The Joe Dante movie Spielberg produced? Come to think of it, there was a scene where

a character is grumbling about having to send foreign made goods off to be repaired all the time because gremlins live inside and cause trouble.

"Airplanes are very new, and changing rapidly, so there's a lot of trial and error, and people get anxious, which gave rise to the gremlins," Penelope explained. I was nodding as she spoke, but my understanding was quickly turned on its head. The zombie that had plagued Jorge Joestar as a child, Antonio Torres. "Antonio had a Wound that allowed him to shed his entire skin once a year. He'd followed Jorge to England, and was attacking airplane pilots – this was the start of the stories about gremlins."

And at last her story took us to recent events, events from a month before.

"A commander in the air force, where Jorge served, was actually possessed by Antonio Torres. When Jorge found out, he was killed..." Penelope was silent for a moment before continuing. "I went to the commander's house with Elizabeth. It was here, in Wastewood. I saw Elizabeth kill that commander. Antonio Torres was inside his body, and Elizabeth...she was beyond furious. I could tell it was all she could do to keep herself from going mad. She's normally so calm, and quick witted, but she said only one thing. 'I'm going to kill every last one of you.' But I don't think there's any way she can do that. Before she killed Antonio Torres, he said, "Just go ahead and try! There's 920,000 of me!" And that same day, 920,000 Antonios surrounded Great Britain, and I accidentally made a giant locked room out of his bodies."

Penelope trailed off, dejected. Cars had been listening with a massive grin on his face. "The attempted invasion of England in 1915," he began. "A few dozen units to attack the Hamon warriors, a few hundred to bombard London, but of those few hundred, the pilots themselves were zombies, and the sun wasn't out, so there was no need for Antonio Torres' power. In which case we can

assume no more than a thousand Antonios, at most, were used up in the war. If Antonio Torres became a zombie in 1900, and each Antonio shed a skin once a year, that's 14 sheds by 1915, or two to the power of fourteen, so there should have been exactly 16,384 Antonios. Assuming a thousand perished, that leaves us 15,384. Then five more years passed until 1920, and each of the previous fifteen years of Antonios increased by two to the power of six, leaving us with 984,576. In twenty years, Antonio increased himself to nearly a million. But according to Penelope de la Roza, her wall was made from 920,000. So what happened to the 60,000 Antonios that did not die in the war or get turned into a wall?"

Penelope had no answer.

Cars chuckled. "What? Never thought to count the zombies before? If there was 60,000 zombies out there, they can turn ten times that many humans into zombies. I don't mean one can take on ten men – one can take on two. But if one has to go after ten men, then if it manages to turn the first two, that's three against seven, and a moment later all ten are zombies. Even if humans manage to win with their ten to one odds, seven versus seventy leads to all out panic, and if they have seventy zombies, a town of a thousand humans is wiped out. Ignoring the existence of 60,000 zombies is rather foolish."

Right. From what I'd heard, the zombies here were nothing like the living dead created by George A Romero. They could think, and they retained skills and knowledge they'd had in life. A former pilot could still fly a plane, and they could even learn to fly one after becoming a zombie. Even a trained fighting force would be thrown into a panic if zombies appeared amongst them.

At least 60,000? Trying to picture that nightmare in any concrete terms made me dizzy. Antonio Torres was just a flat skin, so if we folded him up and put him away maybe he wouldn't spread out that much...but that was just my imagination running

away from it. This was a zombie that could fly under his own power, and knew how to fly a plane, too. If he tried doing anything to humanity, he'd be a fearsome enemy. This reminded me of the news Shiobana had given me as we fell to Earth in the collection of Giotto's.

There are actual reports of patients in Sardinia and the Touhoku region of Japan going berserk and attacking people. Their symptoms are contagious, and the number of victims is rising. It's like a zombie movie.

I'd remembered far too late in all the commotion, but it sure sounded like zombies had shown up in modern Japan and Italy as well. But that was 2012, not here, and in modern times, a few dozen times through the birth and death of the universe. What connection could there be between the zombie outbreak here and the news of zombies in our own time? Was a massive zombie outbreak just something that happened at least once in every history?

It wasn't out of the question. Our universe had produced Cars, the Ultimate Thing, every time, blown him out into space, and gathered him on the dark side of Mars. I'd gone my whole life without knowing the food chain had Cars and the other pillar men at the top, vampires below them, and zombies below that. They'd always been there. Of course, there were not many zombies who could fly. Zombies were humans to begin with, and there were almost no humans who could fly.

Shiobana had also said, **I suppose the key difference from the movies is that there are rumors of flying zombies.**

If flying zombies existed, then did that mean our time also had an Antonio Torres?

Had something caused Antonio Torres to time travel? I soon

realized the obvious way that might have occurred. Tsukumojuku had left La Palma, and fallen through time in the Bermuda Triangle. He'd arrived in Nishi Akatsuki, in 2012.

I remembered what Tsukumojuku had said in the hospital.

Come to think of it, I had *Antonio Torres, 1900* – his skin – in my luggage...did it arrive here with me? I was gathering my belongings right before I passed out, and I'm certain I had the tube it was in slung over my shoulder.

Tsukumojuku had disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle in 1904. If a zombie Antonio Torres (zombified in 1900) had traded places with the skin sample, *Antonio Torres, 1900*, and traveled through time with Tsukumojuku, then...he'd been a zombie four years, so two to the power of four was sixteen, and that number was then reduced to fifteen. That number then doubled yearly and eleven years later, 1915, during the attempted invasion of England those fifteen would be two to the power of ten, and 15,360. Assuming a thousand had died that day, 14,360 would increase over the five years until 1920, and including the peeling day from '15, that was two to the power of six, giving us about 919,040 Antonios. Since the assumption that a thousand had been lost in 1915 was a high estimate, the final figure of 919,040 was fairly close to how many there actually were. So Antonio Torres wasn't hiding another 60,000 of himself somewhere, the two to the power of twenty math simply hadn't reflected all actual events.

One Antonio Torres had left 1904 and was making zombies in 2012, in Nishi Akatsuki. How long had it been since Tsukumojuku arrived in Nishi Akatsuki? It was less than a day, I was sure. But if their movements were already visible, that spoke volumes about how fast and strong they were at propagating. No, in 2012 there were already zombies, I just hadn't known about them. Had they

made contact with Antonio Torres and started the outbreak? In both Japan and Italy? Seemed a bit too far apart, but maybe it had something to do with Morioh and Nero Nero Island turning into rhinoceros beetles?

Of course it did. There's no way that was just coincidence. Here in England, the island of Great Britain, Penelope had said she'd made a wall out of the zombies, but if that was the armor and it were to grow legs and this massive island turned into a really huge rhinoceros beetle...this thought made me jump to my feet. I went out of the room, up to the bridge, up a ladder, opened the hatch, and looked up at the orange Western sky from the highest place on Das Boot as it sailed through the forests and meadows on its way to London. The sky was still fairly bright.

There was no substantial difference between the sky now and the sky when we'd first arrived. The west was bright and the east dark, stars and moon visible in only half the sky. We'd been here over two hours, but the sun still looked to have just vanished over the horizon, and stuck there. Or in this world, had time itself stopped?

Or, I thought, was this island racing after the sun across the surface of the ocean? Onwards to the west. Towards the center of the Atlantic Ocean, the ocean that didn't exist in my world.

But if we were keeping up with the sun, we must be going really fast. Was it the armor that kept us feeling the G-forces and wind? When Morioh started moving, we hadn't noticed until Arrow Cross House moved, and we looked down at the sea from the top of the hill. Same thing. No joke. Great Britain was the third rhinoceros beetle. We were riding the back of it again.

Someone else came up on the bridge behind me, asking what was up, and of course it was Enrico Pucci, and I figured his religious fervor had sniffed it out. But there was no way to stop this flow now, and it would likely take us to whatever resolution lay in

store.

I filled Pucci in, and before I was even halfway he'd figured it out, and got that gleam in his eyes again. "We only need one more rhinoceros beetle, a spiral staircase, two singularities, and the secret emperor!"

"Hmm? What about the fig tart?"

Pucci turned and looked at me. "Didn't you notice?"

"...notice what?"

"When we fell to Earth, Cars' body began to burn. With a sweet scent. That was the smell of a fig tart."

Uh...I was a bit disgusted, actually. I'd noticed it was a fruity scene, but the reason I hadn't compared it to smells in my memory because it was the smell of burning flesh – perhaps not human flesh, but of something humanoid that spoke like a man. Perhaps experiences akin to religious miracles overcame basic human impulses like that, or perhaps he just never cared for such things in the first place.

"Also," Pucci said, heedless of the look on my face. "In many countries, figs are believed to be the fruit of immortality, and in the old testament, 2 Kings 20-7, they are described thusly. The prophet Isiah came to a sick man, Hezekiah, and knew at once there was no saving him. 'Set your house in order, for you shall die. You cannot live longer'. As Hezekiah wept, and prayed to God, Isiah turned to leave...and God spoke to him. Isiah returned to Hezekiah and said, 'Take some figs, and put them on that swelling, and you will be cured.' Well? Seems appropriate that Cars' body smelled of figs now, doesn't it?"

He fixed his eyes on me, waiting as I desperately tried to

come up with any sort of response when from down below I was surprised to hear the pebble phone go plu pon pin para para pon. Wow. I know they ignored the laws of physics but to this degree? Narancia called up to me. "Hey! Jorge? Where are you!?"

"Up here!" I said, going back inside the ship. Narancia gave me the phone, muttering, "Not like I'd understand any of it."

"Hello?"

"Buccellati here. Where are you? Wasn't that you falling on Morioh earlier?"

"I think it was. But we've wound up somewhere far away. In a way, even farther than Mars."

"...? What do you mean? Stop beating around the bush and speak clearly."

"We're in England. The island of Great Britain."

"...what? No such country or island exists."

"We're in a universe and time when they did. A world before the universe died and was reborn. Although I'm not sure saying that clears up much of anything."

"It certainly doesn't. Be that as it may, are you able to get back here?"

"We're attempting to begin looking for a way to do that."

"Right..."

"How are things over there? Did anything happen to Arrow Cross House? I think our spaceship hit it."

"It did. You crashed through the ceiling and made a dent in the floor, but it's fixed now. The building itself is basically a Stand, apparently. The Stand girl controlling it is fine, too."

"Oh, good. That's a relief."

"The main casualty is the manga artist's desk. He was quite irate."

"Ah ha ha. What about the American army?"

"Thanks to you and Narancia, only minor injuries on either

side. No one dead or seriously injured. The navy units that landed are already starting to surrender. Apparently they're unable to contact HQ at all. And nobody can get in or out. After you crashed, Morioh's barrier came back up. The sky's gone pitch black, no moon or stars. Since there's next to no functioning electricity, the entire town is shrouded in darkness. Only Arrow Cross House still has lights, water, and gas. Thankfully."

"No moon or stars? We could see the sky just fine earlier in the day, so the barrier wasn't opaque or anything."

"Right. But we can't see anything now. We saw Nero Nero Island rear up from the shock of your impact, but it's vanished now. I think it was knocked away outside of Morioh, but since the barrier came back up we can't be sure. Diavolo's minions remain, so we'd like to draw them out while we can."

"That's right, you said you found this boss? Diavolo?"

"His body, yes."

"Who killed him?"

"Who indeed? I've no idea."

Was this a mafiaesque lie or evasion? "...can you tell me what you do know?"

"Certainly," he said, and I must have sounded surprised, because he added, "Well, we have the other detectives here. Even without you there's a lot we can have inspected. They've proven quite useful. I'm learning how to handle detectives myself; seems like it'll come in handy."

The mafia's pet detective? I could see that happening.

"So?"

"We found them both in the central room of the Arrow Cross House. The one Kishibe Rohan calls his study."

".....hunh? So?"

"? That's we were found them. Both lying on the floor."

"On the study carpet?"

"I suppose."

"Hunh? But that room was totally empty, nothing else in it but the desk!"

"Yes. You've been in and out of it all day. But that's where the two bodies were. And judging by the progression of rigor mortis and the amount of blood in the carpet, and how dry that blood was, they were killed right there, and had been lying there for at least twelve hours."

"Twelve hours!?"

"Since eight this morning."

"Eh...? But that's right after Tsukumojuku's body was found, and tons of cops were going in and out. And yet two people were murdered there and nobody noticed the bodies?"

"That's the long and short of it. It is a mystery, but Joestar, is there really any need to solve it? The dead are a mafia boss and a serial killer. I'm not exactly an honest citizen myself, but we're better off with both of them dead."

".....! But you've verified both bodies' identities?"

"Yes. Want to see?"

"Eh? Uh, if there's a way to, sure."

"Then I'll send them to you. Don't tell anyone, but this is Abbacchio's Stand, Videodrome."

I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I swear.

So a display screen appeared on the surface of the pebble, showing two files.

First one. First shot was of two male corpses on the floor. I'd never seen either face before. One was Japanese, in a suit, thin, with hair that was well combed except for a few stray hairs clearly deliberately let loose to suggest 'fun' in a way that just made him seem all the more fastidious. He was reasonably handsome, but there was something plain and unmemorable about his face, a quality that I knew was really common with serial killers. This type

made it a daily effort to not stand out, and not draw attention.

The other had an obviously sinister set to his face. He had long hair, with a bizarre speckled pattern. His eyes were open, but not only were they not rounded, they were twisted, frayed, as if the evil dwelling within had caused an unnatural transformation. He was so obviously weird I didn't see how he could ever live in normal society. The reason he'd hidden himself so thoroughly was clearly because, looking like this, it would be nigh impossible to find a double if his life was in danger, and it would be very difficult to blend into the crowd or avoid being noticed when out in public.

Both their throats had been slit. As deep as Tsukumojuku's wound, from ear to ear. They must have died instantly.

This was filmed by someone crouching next to the blood-stained bodies. The crouching man was named Leone Abbacchio. One of Buccellati's men. He first moved to the Japanese man, removed the suit, peeled off the shirt, and once the man's scrawny torso was revealed, plunged his hand into his stomach. His hand went deep into the body, ten centimeters past the wrist, and felt around for something. When he pulled his hand out, there was a video tape in it. There was a title written on the spine, in Japanese.

"Kira Yoshikage, July 24th, 2012."

There were control buttons directly on the corner of the tape, and when he pressed the triangular play button the tape unfolded until it was shaped like a man – the dead Japanese man. Kira Yoshikage, the serial killer who made people explode. He was in a state of absolute panic, covered in sweat, the last thing a man as fastidious and unassuming as this killer would want to be. Numbers appeared in the air, like a countdown in an old movie.

3. 2. 1.

"Ahh!" the man screamed, and offered no real resistance as his throat split open, blood sprayed out, and he fell to the floor, dead. Tah dah! The words, "The End" appears in the air.

Hunh? Was that it? Kinda anti-climactic, I thought. Kira's form began to writhe, then folded itself back up into the video tape it had started as.

Next, Abbacchio reached toward the corpse of the white man with the ultra weird hair and eyes, peeled off his shirt to expose his belly, and reached inside, rummaging around until he found a video tape. The title was written in Italian. "AKA Diavolo, July 24th, 2012."

The white man stood up, but he was as beside himself as Kira, his face crumpled in despair. There was a Stand behind him, humanoid but with a face like an insect, and another face on its forehead. The countdown began. 3. 2. 1.

"Ahh!" His throat split up, sprayed blood, and he collapsed.

Hunh!? The same thing here!?

As I watched the tape fold itself back up, Buccellati said, "That's it. Shortly after that your ship fell. It was all we could do to grab the bodies and get out."

"....."

"...OK, listen close, Joestar. Videodrome records everything that happens to someone for twenty-four hours after midnight, but cuts off at the moment of their death. ...you realize what that means?"

"? What?"

"There is no record of them from midnight until eight AM, the estimated time of their death. Normally Videodrome should be able to replay everything they did in that time. But no such thing exists for them. Until eight AM, these men were somewhere else, somewhere not of this world. They appeared out of nowhere in the Arrow Cross House just in time to die, lived for approximately one second, were killed, died, and then until quite recently, as piles of cops went in and out, and the home's residents went about their business, nobody noticed their bodies lying in the middle of

the floor."

"But...that's impossible!"

"But it is the truth. Videodrome replays only truth. And yet, Jorge Joestar, this is a mafia boss, and a serial killer. I may be a cold hearted son of a bitch, but both of them were evil incarnate. This... Kira Yoshikage was calling himself Kawajiri Kosaku. He worked in manufacturing, did his job like anyone else. His wife's an election official, his kid is on the soccer team at his elementary school. They seem like an ordinary suburban family, but as the investigation grew close he brutally murdered both his wife and child. Someone on my team has a unique power that allows them to investigate these things, but he found trophies from over a hundred different women in that house. And Diavolo killed far more than a hundred. And not all of those victims were from enemy crime syndicates. If someone was a problem for him, or if he merely stood to gain an advantage, he would kill civilians, politicians, law enforcement, even his own men, without hesitation. He forced the desperate poor to work for him and then abandoned them, sold women and children, licked the marrow from the bones of the rich, and forced the world around him and everyone he came in contact with to rot. These two men deserved to die. The world is better off with them dead. So don't worry about it."

".....!?"

"Get it? I'll put this plainly. Don't bother trying to figure out the truth behind their deaths. Don't do anything. If you want to write their killer a thank you note, that's one thing, but if you even consider trying to arrest them...in my opinion you'll be barking up the wrong tree. Them dying is a good thing. Whoever killed them did us all a service. A service to all mankind."

My head was going in circles, so I clutched it tight, asking,

"Do we know their Stand powers?"

"...yes. Between Abbacchio's Videodrome and the owner of the Arrow Cross House's Stand, we figured it out. This manga artist might be an eccentric, but he has the ideal Stand for uncovering people's secrets. Of course, he'll do nothing he doesn't want to, even if you threaten him with force, but if you just convince him it's the right thing to do, he'll jump at it."

That got a laugh out of me. Wish I could have seen Kishibe Rohan face down the Mafia.

"Kira Yoshikage's Stand was named Killer Queen," Buccellati continued. "It could make someone explode directly, or turn them into a bomb. Two types of bombs – bombs Killer Queen had to trigger with a switch, and bombs that would explode on contact if someone touched them. It could even remove its left hand and turn it into a tank-like Stand called Sheer Heart Attack that would operate automatically, tracking people via their heat signatures. And Killer Queen had one more power. Bites the Dust. It remains a bit of an enigma, but it could turn someone into a bomb that would go off if anyone asked about Kira, or the bomb said his name. The moment it killed whoever was searching for him, it would somehow turn back time an hour. Only the person he'd turned into a bomb would remember the previous version of that day, but the fate of those he blew up would not change, and they would again explode even if the bomb avoided contact with them. With no apparent cause at all."

Kira Yoshikage's Bites the Dust had turned Kishibe Rohan into a bomb. And it could turn back time? Man, he really had the perfect power for what he was after.

"And the boss of our Passione Family, who called himself the devil, Diavolo...his Stand was named King Crimson. He had a face type stand on his forehead called Epitaph, and this could accurately predict the future, albeit for only ten seconds. He could

then erase that part of the future, leaving only the experience of it behind, with no other impact on what happened next. Say you ate something, and felt full. He could use King Crimson to remove the part where you ate, leaving you with no idea why you felt full. He could predict the future, and delete time! No wonder he survived so many assassination attempts."

Buccellati explained a few mysterious events experienced during syndicate betrayals and conflicts, but I wasn't really listening – I was thinking.

Kira Yoshikage and Diavolo both had Stands that could, in some fashion, manipulate time. That was tugging at my mind.

Time.

Arrow Cross House.

Tsukumojuuku had died in the Arrow Cross House, but he had traveled through time, too. He'd come from England, 1904, to Nishi Akatsuki, and died in Morioh in the Arrow Cross House, but appeared out of nowhere in the middle of everything and taken me to Mars. Tsukumojuuku had been the first to time travel, and he'd talked about Beyond, **Hey! I am your instrument. Someone needs you. I'll take you to him.** The way he'd smiled made me just accept what he was saying, but the first time slip was entirely the fault of the Bermuda Triangle, or at least whatever it was that had created an area that, according to the legends, caused people and ships to vanish. I couldn't explain it, and the logistics of it remained unclear, but it felt like reason enough. But the second? When he'd taken me to Mars? What led to that?

I couldn't see it.

But obviously, time slip or whatever, if something happened there was a reason for it. I just didn't know what it was, but when Tsukumojuuku had smiled he'd had a reason for it, knew why he was acting, and could have explained it. Otherwise nobody who called themselves a detective could ever be so carefree. He'd had no time

for exposition, but Tsukumojuku had known everything. That was why all the confusion he'd displayed when he arrived in Nishi Akatsuki had disappeared. Yeah. Because Tsukumojuku had solved all the mysteries, he'd come to me, and died.

And the reason he'd spoken in riddles wasn't just because he didn't have time explain properly, but because I was a detective too, and he was having a little fun at my expense. Like, you still don't get it, do you? He was ribbing me because I was struggling with something I should have worked out by now. Tsukumojuku knew that I would figure it out.

That meant I should be able to solve this.

Being flung out to Mars and winding up in England in the distant past may seem completely batshit, but it all had meaning. I knew that. There was no reason to think otherwise. The rules of this world hadn't changed at all. I just had to think it through. Time and the Arrow Cross House.

We'd traveled through time one more time. Cars' ship had definitely crashed directly on top of the Arrow Cross House. But we didn't die in the wreck; instead we were thrown to England in 1920. Thrown?

That's right. We didn't come here. Arrow Cross House had sent us here.

That was the purpose of the Arrow Cross House. It could send someone through time and space of its own free will.

How? To pass through time, you needed a hole in the space time continuum, or a wormhole that linked to a different time and place, or you needed to somehow bend space time and take a shortcut. Wormholes were more or less fixed to specific points in space time, so the Bermuda Triangle was probably one of those. But the Arrow Cross House was different. We'd been thrown super

far back, to England in 1920 in a different history of the universe, and it had used poor dead Tsukumojuku to take Narancia and me from Budogaoka Academy campus to a spaceship orbiting Mars. Thinking about it, how much free will had Tsukumojuku had?

When he appeared before me, he'd seemed to know I was there.

Hey! I am your instrument. Someone needs you. I'll take you to him.

And after he took me to the H. G. Wells, he'd known there would be a spaceship, and wasn't surprised by it at all.

Whoops. Brought an anomaly along, but...it all means something, I'm sure. Bye!

If he'd been just a victim, caught up in a time slip and flung here and there, he'd have been confused by it all. He'd never have noticed that Narancia came along. He'd been quite lost the night before, when he'd arrived in Nishi Akatsuki.

Perdón. ¿Qué pasó? ¿Dónde estoy?

That night, Tsukumojuku was not only super confused, he was even a bit frightened. But after he'd died, when he was taking us to Mars, he'd understood everything, was totally comfortable in his role, and even had time to give me the kind of smirk I could only take as a challenge. By then, he wasn't just aware of what was going on, Tsukumojuku was controlling the time traveling of his own free will.

If Arrow Cross House was a device to bypass space time, then Tsukumojuku had learned to use it.

Arrow Cross House could bend space time, and create short cuts. It could choose a place and time, and send us there. It could even act like a delivery service, picking someone up and putting them where they needed to go. But how? How was it bending space time?

There were two ways that modern science was aware of.

Speed and gravity.

Giant celestial bodies like suns and black holes could bend the fabric of space time; light didn't proceed in a straight line past them. But in Morioh? Nothing with that powerful a gravitational field existed or could exist inside Arrow Cross House. After all, to increase gravitational pull, you had to increase mass. Morioh and the Arrow Cross House were too small to contain something that large. To compress the volume of that mass required even more power, and if they succeeded they'd just end up with a black hole. Could Tsukumojuku control something like that? He wasn't even a Stand Master. If Arrow Cross House's Stand power was having a black hole, there'd be more to what it did than just time travel. Things would disappear, be crushed, and it would absorb all light and sound. I'd been in Arrow Cross House, and sensed nothing so chaotic. It was quiet, calm, elegant, and relaxed, like you'd expect the home of a working author to be. Nothing I'd seen suggested there could be a black hole hidden somewhere. Absorbing...?

No, that wasn't right, I realized. It couldn't just absorb.

Tsukumojuku hadn't just traveled through time, he'd gone back to Arrow Cross House afterward, and died. If he'd just been absorbed, he could never have gone back. Maybe there was a way to reverse the gravitational pull, but before considering that I had to reconsider my initial premise.

If Arrow Cross House was a device, could I determine the function from the construction and design?

Arrow Cross House was a functional compass, but the core of it was still the Cube House.

The Tesseract.

The house was made of eight square rooms that allowed you to move indefinitely in any direction. The key quality lay in that infinite nature, not in any gravitational compression.

OK then...I was about to start going over the idea of using

speed, when I realized something. Damn it, I thought. I'd already peered directly into the heart of the Cube House's device. When we'd gone to Kishibe Rohan's study with Grand Blue, we'd opened the door in the floor and realized if we went four rooms down we'd end up where we started. Later on, when they were about to open the door again, Sugimoto Reimi said, **Wait! Make sure you don't fall straight down.** We'd all instantly pictured what would happen.

The room below the room below the room below this one was the study, so if I broke through all three, I'd fall forever. What would happen then? If gravity increased my fall speed here, I'd fall until I hit terminal velocity.

That was as far as I'd thought through it then, but perhaps that velocity wouldn't be terminal, but instead bend space time.

It already had. When we fell out of the sky, and landed on the Arrow Cross House.

The main casualty is the manga artist's desk. He was quite irate.

We'd gone through the ceiling of the Cube House, smashed Kishibe Rohan's desk to bits, burst through the door underneath it, and the floor below and the floor below, and gotten lost in the infinite loop. Normally air resistance would have been slowing us down, but inside the Cube House, we'd sped up, until we were going fast enough that time and space bent around us. And then what? Which direction had it bent?

Without knowing it was a time travel device, we'd simply fallen. No conscious will was at work. We didn't consciously want or try to go anywhere. If the device was activated, but received no orders, and we just kept going faster and faster, how would the device handle that?

If the device could be controlled at will, and there was no will present within the device, then it must take input from outside

sources. The device would then connect us to the will of someone far away.

That was it. The infinite vertical shaft at the heart of the Arrow Cross House was a device to bend space time. If the people falling through it wanted to go somewhere, it would send them there. But if the people falling expressed no such desire, then it could pick up on the desire of someone outside. Tsukumojuku knew this, which explained why he'd said **Hey! I am your instrument. Someone needs you. I'll take you to him.**

I had caught up with Tsukumojuku.

All of this took about thirty seconds. Buccellati was still going on about what a piece of shit Diavolo had been, and did not seem to have noticed that I'd gone quiet. What he was saying made a certain amount of sense. But he was a gangster, and didn't understand.

"Buccellati," I said. "I can't move forward if I don't solve the mystery. That's the nature of a detective."

"...oh," he said. And then said what anyone with a deep understanding of human work and duty would say. "In that case, go ahead."

"Yo, we can see London!" Narancia said, so I hung up the phone and went up to the bridge, and saw a huge city covered in rubble from the fierce battles fought there.

"This must be Desolation Row!" the priest said, collecting yet another of his symbols.

"We've been waiting for you! Our very own angel! Enrico

Pucci," came a voice.

We turned, and two men stood on the deck of Das Boot as it moved through the forest. I recognized one of them; a well-dressed man with distinctive swirls of hair. "I am the President of the United States, Funny Valentine," he said. This was not Funny from 2012, but the Funny from this world. He was young, but looked exactly like the Funny and Funnier and The Funniest I'd seen on TV.

Funny ignored us, speaking only to Pucci, who appeared to be at a loss. "Ha ha ha! You look surprised, Father. As a man of faith, you did not think to be called an angel yourself? Be that as it may, all that remains is one rhinoceros beetle, two singularities, and a spiral staircase. For the last rhinoceros beetle, if you follow the bank of the Thames to the south, you'll soon see it. Or perhaps since I am here, you already understand? We've come to meet you. To take you to the island that will become the center of the world."

".....!?"

"It is, of course, in our United States."

"....."

"Now, and when you were there."

"...and there is a church."

"Ha ha ha! Exactly! There is a also a church, named for that which we serve."

"Trinity Church."

"Indeed! There are three churches of that name in America, but only one on the island."

"New York. Manhattan Island."

"Precisely! I've just been to see it. The fourth Rhinoceros Beetle is Manhattan!"

Great Britain was headed west, the mouth of the Thames at its fore. It had crossed the Atlantic, and clambered up onto the United States. The giant insect's countless legs straddled the Hudson, half in Connecticut, and half in New York. It headed north into New York harbor, the tips of the skyscrapers at eye level. But Great Britain showed no signs of slowing down.

"But Manhattan is not a real rhinoceros beetle, I'm afraid," Funny said. Great Britain's southern extremity stepped up into Manhattan, tackling the skyscrapers and flattening the island. "As President, I find this situation regrettable, but to build greater prosperity for America, it is time to cut the country loose. This is, well, a sort of ritual. An initiation."

Thanks to the wall surrounding Great Britain, we couldn't hear the sounds of it, or feel the vibrations, but we knew it must be a living hell down below. Narancia and Penelope were as shaken as I was. All three of us must have looked ready to faint.

"We must move forward, Father Pucci," Funny said. "Have you found the singularity yet?"

".....!?"

"Think! What is a singularity but a point? A point is but part of a line. A line is a connection. And what is a connection?"

Pucci stepped forward to stand beside me. "Time," he said. "Time's relation to man."

"Ha ha ha!" Funny cried. "Well put. Two are enough. And what are the two times?"

"Time I have lived through, and the time I am living."

"Yes! That's it! And the two that connect them?"

"Myself and God...is what I would have said, but judging from your arrival, that may not be the case."

"Ha ha!"

"In which case...me. And myself."

"You have it! You are connected to yourself, Father Pucci!"

As am I to me!"

".....!"

"You know me well, but not this me. Correct?"

"Correct..."

"But we are linked. How so?"

".....!"

"I am me but at the same time I am not. How can this be true? I believe you know the answer, Father Pucci."

"Yes, I do."

"Please share!"

"Because I can make a connection. Because I can't make the connection."

".....!"

"Because what I create is the Spiral Staircase."

"Very good! Just one last thing. Allow me to introduce the Secret Emperor!" Funny gestured to the man beside him, a tall, muscular man brimming with power. I'd seen him before. In the photo Cars projected.

The sinister man floating in the air above Cape Canaveral. The adopted son of the Joestar family, the one who'd botched a train robbery.

Dio Brando.

"You may love me, Enrico Pucci," Dio said. There was a crown of thorns around his head.

Holes in the hands he held out.

And his bare feet.

When he saw this stigmata, Pucci wept. "My lord...!"

And Pucci began to cast aside his Stand. Arrows appeared

all over White Snake's body, and Pucci began to levitate. In that instant, I could no longer stand normally on the desk of Das Boot. Unless I focused my mind on Pucci as he floated, I didn't feel like I was standing upright, didn't feel balanced. Everyone else was staggering, their gaze focused on Pucci's head, like a shot from the music video for Michael Jackson's Smooth Criminal. I could see Funny Valentine's coat flapping, though there was no wind. Pucci had become absolute up, the center of all things, and everything radiating out from around him was now down. Dio and Cars alone stood normally, as straight as they ever had, but not because this force wasn't acting on them, just they both possessed the physical strength needed to ignore the change in gravity. Cars' long hair and Dio's cape were pulled towards Pucci, just as we were. The higher Pucci rose, the closer we came to what had originally been bolt upright. Pucci was the center of gravity, and looking up at him, one thought ran through my mind. **Gravity.** If you could control it at will, you could bend space and time. And that was why Pucci was killing his own Stand. With the arrows covering every inch of it, cracks were beginning to run across the surface of White Snake, and as it shattered, a clock man on a two legged horse emerged.

"So this is Made in Heaven!" Pucci said, enthralled. Cars stood behind us, paying Pucci no heed. His eyes were on Dio, who met his gaze, his smile as brazen as before.

"Now, let us go to Heaven!" Pucci cried, and the moment before he activated Made in Heaven, Dio held up his hand, and the wall of air that covered Great Britain formed the upside-down upper half of a giant boy, which rose up and looked down at us. It's eyes were open, but it had no eyes. This was a combined version of all the Antonio Torres that Penelope had made the wall from. Hanging upside-down from the sky wall, it reached out it's massive

hand, and snatched Pucci out of the air.

Dio looked up at Pucci, and said, "Don't be in such a rush, gutter trash. Your job is to sweep and clear the outside."

"How mean!" Penelope yelled, and clapped her hands over her mouth. But trapped in the giant's hand, Pucci's expression was as rapturous as ever. Fused Antonio Torres swallowed him whole, sending him outside the armor. Normal gravity returned, and above us, Pucci activated Made in Heaven. Outside the rhinoceros beetle called England, time sped up.

The sun and moon whipped round us, but the zombies were hiding in shadow, and would not die. In the blink of an eye, the universe ended, and began again. Trembling, Penelope reached out and took hold of my sleeve, as I started counting universes. Outside England, in Antonio Torres's belly, the universe looped thirty-six times, bringing the island of Great Britain to the 2012 we had come from.

We landed just in time to flip Morioh over. We were back.

Had our six month journey back from Mars taken only four hours because of Pucci's Stand, too? I asked Cars.

"Yes, but not quite," Cars said. "That man was in a small box, with a much more complicated time flow compressed within. At the same time as he was on the spaceship with us."

"A small box?"

"Somewhere beyond the ends of the world."

".....?" I didn't get this at all. "What was Pucci doing there?"

"Killing a man."

That cleared up nothing, but when I looked up out of the rhinoceros beetle, Pucci was no longer floating above us.

FIFTEEN
Beyond
ビヨンド

Lying half-dead on a back country road in Japan, the exact thing I needed to happen happened.

When I woke up, the flesh from my back and ass was back in place, and the fracture in my skull was healed up. I was sleeping in a large bed surrounded by white walls and almost no other furniture, and a freckled young man sitting next to the bed said, in Italian, "Oh! You're awake, Jorge Joestar."

? "How do you know my name?" I asked, also in Italian, a fact that took me by surprise. How come I spoke Italian now?

"Ha ha ha! The Japanese man who lives here has quite a useful ability. He made it so everyone coming in and out of here can speak English and Italian and Japanese. Including you!"

".....? The hell does that mean...? Where is this? Japan?"

"Japan. Morioh! My name is Vinegar Doppio. But I wasn't the one who saved you, that was my boss. Hang on," he said, and reached out for a book lying on the side table. There was a bizarre picture of a boy on the cover, and the book's title was Pink Dark Boy: Part 8. Volume 112. It was just a bit too large to comfortably hold in the palm of his hand, so Doppio curled it a bit, and held it to his ear. Then he pursed up his lips and began humming a weird little song, "Tomememememem ♪ tomemememememem ♪" and proceeded to ignore me entirely, staring at nothing in particular and yet speaking to someone who wasn't even there. "Oh, hello! This is Doppio. Joestar's awake! ...yes, got it." Then he looked at me. "Yo."

".....?"

"Think you can get up?"

I wasn't sure, but I pushed the duvet back and lowered my legs to the floor. I was still dressed for my wedding, oh god, but I didn't think mentioning that would be much use, and all I could manage was a groan as pain shot through me. My ass and back felt like they were going to rip apart, and my head felt like there was a wooden stake jammed through it.

"Seems to be in a lot of pain." He was calmly reporting the facts to some unseen individual, and it hurt enough I really wanted

to punch the little guy for it. "If you keep moving you'll get used to it. Come on."

"No, I can't!" It hurt so much every part of my face was trying to go a different direction.

"Hey."

"Hunh?"

"Who do you think you're fucking with?" he snarled, but my eyelids were twitching violently and I couldn't even get a good look at his face.

"What...?"

"I'm a fucking gangster, buddy. Pick your words and your answers carefully, got it?" Doppio pulled his shirt up and showed me the gun jammed in the trousers, and I instantly felt far better.

I mean, there was no reason to hold back now! "Don't think I won't use this just cause you're injured!" he said, and tried to lower his shirt, but I grabbed his wrist, snatched the gun with my other hand and smashed the grip up under his chin. Call yourself a gangster? You're like what, fifteen? Sixteen? I'd been shot down by the Germans twice, crashed landed and survived in a god damn hornet's nest so get fucking real. Doppio curled up, clutching his jaw, and I put the barrel of the gun to the back of his head. "Tell me what's going on here, wise guy."

Doppio looked up and glared at me. Didn't seem like he was trying to hide any fear at all. He might be young, but he had some stones. "Ahhh? Wait a minute, asshole..." he said, and raised Pink Dark Boy back to his ear. I found it hard to believe, but it seemed to be a phone. A book-shaped phone. Back in England, phones were the size of cuckoo clocks, and based on their planes and ships Japan's technology wasn't much more advanced, so if this was Japan it wasn't 1920. So my problem wasn't just where I was...it was when.

Suddenly the stake in my head went plu pon pin para para pon ♪ shrill and high and vvvvvv vvvvv vibrated shaking my very brain. "Auuuughh!" What the hell!/? The stake thing had just been a

metaphor a moment ago but now I was sure there really was a stake in my head playing music and vibrating!

"I said, don't fuck with me! You thought I was just the guy on the end of the fucking phone, did ya? You going behind my back calling me Doppio the small talk loving phone phreak?" Based on the crap the kid was saying he was the one sloshing my brains. He'd done something to me. With a phone. I had to make him stop. But the vibrations in my head seriously had me about to pass out and I couldn't get my body to obey any commands from my brain so I couldn't raise my arm, point the gun at Doppio, or pull the trigger. All I could do was feel my eyes roll back in my head, drool, and say "Ackackackackackack!" I was dying. I had a phone inside me somehow and it was ringing and vibrating. He was trying to kill me. I didn't care how. I had to do what I could do. Point the barrel up. I couldn't aim it so I brought the barrel to my own head, used my head and the floor to keep it as steady as I could, and put my last strength into pulling that trigger. I didn't need to get a clean shot through. Mechanical things would stop working if even a bit of them broke! Bang!

The bullet gouged out a gouge in my skin and skull seven centimeters long and seven millimeters deep, and clipped about two millimeters off the part of my skull that had been turned into a phone. That was enough. The vibration and ringing stopped. I never had feeling in my brain in the first place, but it was still a bit numb.

"Motherfucker...!" Doppio yelled. I didn't miss the flash of fear this time. My hands weren't shaking any more. I turned the gun towards Doppio's face and didn't hesitate. Bam bam bam bam!

But even though I was firing from less than a meter away, not one of the bullets hit; all wound up in the wall behind him.

There was a man in a hat standing next to me, a gun in his hand. "Knock it off," he said. "He maybe a bit fucked in the head, but he's a mafia made man, and if something happens to him we'd have to pay it back. That's how the system works."

He'd done something to make shots I'd never have missed

with miss. Who the hell were these people? Making phones inside my head...how the hell was any of this possible?

"Hey! Shoot him, Mista!" Doppio yelled, and Mista turned his gun on Doppio.

"Shut the fuck up! I wanna shoot you myself! Get your shit together, you're the fucking worst when you're like this!"

"The fuck!?! You saying I'm a phone-o-holic ring ring hello hello it's me, Doppio ♡!?"

"What!?! I don't even know what the fuck you're talking about! Fucking halfwit!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang! Mista fired six shots right at Doppio. Uh, so you can shoot him? I thought, but then I saw... Well, I saw something. And heard them, too. Tiny little people in crazy peacock clothes riding on the backs of the bullets yelling, "Nooooooo! Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ♡♡♡♡♡!" in deep, hoarse voices. As I stared in disbelief, they each kicked their bullet aside just before it hit Doppio, deflecting them just enough that three shots went on either side of his face, brushing his cheeks and thud thud thud thud thud into the wall behind him. The bullet trails left marks on Doppio's cheeks like cat whiskers. Doppio must have seen what I saw because he froze in place, not moving a muscle, as Mista cackled wildly. "Da ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Look at the itty bitty kitty cat! You're so adorbs, Doppio! Wah ha ha ha ha ha!" The six tiny people hovering around Doppio's face laughed too.

"OMG, Doppio, that looks soooo good on you!" "I love it, you've gotta keep the scars!" "Yeah, Mista, gunpowder! Imprint this shit now and it'll be the rendezvous of chic and avant garde!" "Oh! Cat ears!" "Ugh, no way, Back Left, that's pushing it." "You are just getting too carried away being in Japan." "You're the last person we need weebing out, Back Left." "Woah ♡♡ Front Center! You sure know how to bring it! ♡♡♡♡♡" They were quite the rowdy bunch, but what were they!? Were they alive!?

But just as I hit peak confusion, a blonde boy strode into the room, followed by several others. He looked no older than Doppio,

with delicate yet not at all feminine features. Out of all the men I'd met, he was the only one to equal Tsukumojuku in beauty. It was like there was some blinding light pouring out of every cell in his body that made it hard to look directly at him.

"Jorge Joestar, I apologize for my men's manners," he said.

He was holding a cake of soap in his hand, and came over to inspect my wound. I was 189 centimeters tall, and he only came up to my chest, but he held the soap and his free hand up to the gunshot wound, and when he pulled his hands back the soap was gone, and he was holding a baseball cap instead. The boy looked the hat over, then turned to the bullet-filled wall.

"Doppio, you turned this into a phone before you handed it to me?"

Shaking like a leaf, Doppio fell to his knees. "I'm sorry, Giorno! I just couldn't help myself!"

"...once it's become a phone, that quality remains..." he said, staring down at the hat. It just looked like a hat to me.

"Hello, Jorge Joestar," he said, looking up at me. "My name is Giorno Giovanna."

There was a power to him, but it wasn't intimidating. That specific gnarled edge common to those in the life was nowhere to be found. He reminded me of a world-class swimmer standing on land. Like he'd focused on one simple thing and made himself better at it than anyone else. But there was more to him. This boy had turned thugs like Doppio and Mista into his men. And he had some kind of mysterious ability, too. He'd healed the wound in my head again.

"What sort of power is this?" I asked.

"I couldn't begin to explain," he said, meeting my gaze. "But we call them Stands. And those with them, Stand Masters."

The Hamon masters call these Spirit Hamon, or Stands. A strange name, but people with this power can see the power

standing next to them, like a ghost.

That was fifteen years ago. The night of the mothman, when we'd decided to leave La Palma. As we sat before my father's head, Lisa Lisa had told us about them. **Stands.**

"This manga artist, Kishibe Rohan, has a Stand that allows you to see Stands," Giovanna explained. "Just as he made it so we can all speak Italian. Puts us all on the same page."

One of the men who'd come in with Giovanna was a thin man with a sullen face. When my eyes met his he sniffed loudly. "I just want you all to leave as soon as possible. That's the only reason I'm helping. You've got blood all over my bed! I'm high-strung, you know! And the clock in my study's gone missing! There's a thief among us!"

The Italians all grinned, and the lone Japanese man looked even less happy. I was starting to get an idea what was going on here. Some bad guys were teasing the civilians.

"So? Now we're on the same page, what? Why'd you want to talk to me?"

"I understand you spent time in the company of a detective," Giovanna said. "I hear your time together left you with a new type of power called...a Beyond?"

".....!?"

How did he know that?

"Oh, that was me, too," the Japanese man said, waving. "In times like these, I'm glad a man like you came along. Seems like you handled that mess with the air force commander well. I feel like you're the best man to solve this mystery."

"Mystery...?"

"Nobody said? The man who died here is your old friend, Kato Tsukumojuku. I suppose you wouldn't know, but the detective in charge of this case was your double, another Jorge Joestar. A detective from Fukui Prefecture. He seems to have switched places

with you and wound up in England, in 1920."

Murder. I'm the victim. It's all yours, buddy.

Tsukumojuku had mentioned this just a while ago. But I had no clue what anyone was talking about. Tsukumojuku was dead? He'd only just brought me here!

And what did he mean, my double? Detective Jorge Joestar? Who'd switched places with me?

While my head was still spinning Kishibe Rohan proceeded to explain the gist of The Case of the Three Murdered Detectives (including Tsukumojuku) and how their bodies had been arranged. He explained how this other "Jorge Joestar" had come here from Fukui, and about all the insane things that had started happening in Morioh and to the world after he'd arrived here. This only served to deepen my confusion. What had once been an ordinary small town had suddenly split off from Japan, and was now an island floating in the middle of the ocean, and based on another floating island, Nero Nero Island, Morioh most likely had legs and was swimming with them. Apparently. Ah ha ha ha ha ha. What the fuck.

"Jorge Joestar" had gone to Mars with one of the gangsters, returned with some American astronauts only to crash land in a ball of fire on Morioh, but his ship had vanished when it hit the house I was in, the Arrow Cross House, and he'd wound up in the England I'd come from.

And on top of that, my dear old England had been overrun with zombies, and they were headed to London, certain it had been turned into "Desolation Row"...a fact that made me want to get the hell back but apparently Giorno Giovanna intended to take control of the Passione Family now that their boss was dead, and wanted me to solve the murder of their boss, Diavolo, and until then had no intention of letting anyone involved leave the Arrow Cross House.

"What's critical is that we clarify exactly who it was killed Diavolo when nobody knew who he was," Giovanna said. "Diavolo was found with the body of a serial killer named Kira Yoshikage, so we'd also like to clarify their relationship. And we need to figure out if the murder of Kato Tsukumojuku, which also took place here in the Arrow Cross House, had anything to do with Diavolo's case. In other words, what I'm trying to do here is to understand the big picture view of these events, Joestar."

I ignored Giovanna, and began by picking up the copy of Pink Dark Boy from the floor. But I didn't know how to use it. I had to ask Doppio. "Call England with this." He took it and glanced at Giovanna, who said, "Do it," so he did.

"...mm? Hunh?"

"Oh, come on, pull the other one," I said, annoyed.

"No, seriously. Weird, my phones could call outer space and England but..."

"....."

"Nah, Joestar," Mista said, glaring at Doppio. "I've never known him to lie about phones. He'd a bit weird that way."

"Why, though? It was working a few minutes ago," Doppio said, tapping the phone and flipping it over, trying to get it working again. He did seem legitimately confused by it, so maybe Mista was right. A little square machine in Mista's pocket rang and when he answered Doppio swore. "See!?! It does work! Problem isn't on this end, but over there. Dunno if theirs broke or something else went wrong but...I doubt theirs broke, Narancia's phone is just a pebble. Not that easily broken. If they dropped it or lost it, it would still ring just fine. Either they somehow broke a rock or they've wound up in some weird ass place where even my phones are out of range."

Since he said it should call anywhere I got him to tell me how to work it and called the Joestar mansion, but couldn't get

through. What was happening in England?

Doppio took the lightbulb out of the lamp by the bed, turned it into a phone, and tried a few more things. "Well, we can connect to our Rome offices. And San Diego. Tijuana's still working. Guess it ain't the drugs, eh heh heh. Yeah, Joestar, only place that's fucked up is England. Although Morioh itself is pretty fucked up, too. Like the whole town's in a weird fucking mood."

"Um," said a mild-mannered looking gangster, raising his hand. Nearby, another man – one with a bob – answered like a school teacher, "Yes? Fugo?"

Fugo pointed at the window. "That sky looked like the night sky, but I don't believe it is. We can't see the moon and stars, but there's no sign of any clouds covering them, either. Instead, there's something else...floating, or rather, swimming."

The window of Kishibe Rohan's bedroom was at the top of a hill overlooking the harbor and bay. There were boats in the water, making quite a fuss. The boats had their lights aimed at the sky, illuminating a giant creature swimming overhead. It was a whale, and a big one; over two thousand meters long, swimming upside-down, its back to us. A great white sperm whale.

Although at the moment, it is floating upside-down in the Pacific.

"Well, there's Moby Dick," Fugo said. The others let out yelps of surprise. The giant white whale floating upside-down like a spaceship was not the only one, either. All kinds of giant fish were swimming upside-down, or flitting about in schools. Some schools were swimming around the sides of Morioh, and if you peered carefully you could see black shadows gliding over the top of the hill.

"So...I guess this means Morioh is floating upside-down in the water, then?" Mista said. "And is Morioh shrinking? Like...this sounds dumb, but from the water pressure?" He got a lot of shocked looks for that one, and a few derisive laughs, but no one argued his point. The giant white sperm whale passed over the fishermen, lit

by their searchlights. It turned slightly, getting a good look at the upside-down town, then either lost interest or ran out of breath, because it turned and dropped away beyond Morioh's horizon; the surface was beneath us.

"Yikes, the fuck is that?" said a pair of sturdily-built twins in school uniforms. I followed their gaze, and saw a giant octopus stuck to the side of the barrier surrounding Morioh, climbing up (down) the side, its suckers covering half the sky to the south.

"Joestar, is this any time to be sky-gazing?" Giovanna said. But I'd already started thinking. Not about the murders, but about how to get back to England, how to see Lisa Lisa again, how to make sure she got that wedding. The zombies must have taken over after I got sent here, so I'd already missed my wedding day.

But...Lisa Lisa would be fine. I knew she wouldn't die. She wasn't weak enough to get killed by any zombies. That alone I was certain of, no room for doubt in my mind. Thank you, Lisa Lisa, I thought. I may be in this crazy place in a huge old mess, but at least I can put my faith in your strength.

I had to get back to her. But how?

I had to use Beyond. In what way? What had I done before?

I'd thought it through. But what had I thought, specifically?

I'd been told, **Believe in Beyond, and you will overcome your fate.** So I'd tried to believe.

Believing in Beyond meant...**there was an author writing a story with me as the main character.** And in a story, **you couldn't have things that didn't make sense or just showed up out of the blue.** So **I had to create the flow.** What did 'narrative flow' mean here?

If I first had to pay heed to the situation I was in, then I'd have to do as the mafia said, and solve the murder of their boss. Shit. I'm not Tsukumojuku! But before I yelled that, I had another thought. Maybe meeting Tsukumojuku and spending all that time with him on our adventures meant I could use that as a foundation to solve this mystery here? Yeah, that's exactly what I had to do.

Fuck it. "Giovanna, tell me everything," I said.
Giovanna smiled like a flower blooming.

First, I'd do as I was asked. Diavolo and Kira Yoshikage's bodies were lined up on the floor of the study. "We were forced to grab them and haul ass out of the house temporarily when the damn spaceship crashed, but when the ship vanished and the house rebuilt itself we brought them back in. The police are a shit show right now, and with a case like this, you've really gotta be a fucking Stand Master to stand a chance of solving it," said a Stand belonging to one of the sturdily-built Japanese twins, Nijimura Fukashigi. It was called NYPD Blue. Some Stands had minds of their own, I was told. Not just him; Kishibe Rohan's girlfriend, Reimi, looked totally human, and was giggling and whispering in Kishibe's ear as he muttered sullenly about how unfair all of this was. Was this any time to flirt!?! Anyway.

Diavolo and Kira had had their throats slit from ear to ear. Loads of blood. When they told me Tsukumojuku's throat had been slit, too, I got pretty agitated, but I forced myself to concentrate. I had to look at these one at a time. Kishibe used his Stand, Heaven's Door, to turn the two bodies into books. The side of their faces split open, and their skin peeled back like pages, leaving a big hole where the eye had been. But every page was filled with the word 'death' in different languages. Apparently while people were still alive he could read all sorts of information about them, their past, their personality, even things they themselves had failed to notice or had long since forgotten. But at the moment of their death, all of this was overwritten with the word 'death'.

I also took a look at the records made by Leone Abbacchio's Stand, Videodrome. Both Diavolo and Kira appeared in the study for an instant, let out a cry, had their throats slit, and died. Kishibe had him pause Videodrome a moment before their deaths, and turned these recordings into books, but both volumes were almost

entirely blank, with only the most basic of personal information recorded within. Just their names and Stands. Everything about their feelings or memories was totally gone.

"They knew they were about to die, and to a certain extent they'd accepted it. See?" Kishibe said, turning to a page that had already begun to be buried in the word 'death'. "Death begins while we are still alive."

And these two were murdered, and their bodies abandoned, right where Kishibe and the police were moving in and out of here. How could that be? Were Japanese people way more self-absorbed than I'd ever imagined? I couldn't tell what passed for morality here in the future. Didn't matter. I just had to get all the facts lined up. Kishibe made it so they were no longer books.

"Any images of the killer?" I asked.

Abbacchio shook his head. "These are records of the victims lives only."

"Were they brought here and killed at the same time, or is there a time lag between the two murders?"

"We can't tell from the recordings," Abbacchio said. "All we can tell is what happened to each one individually. But we can say that the estimated time of death for both of them is twelve hours ago, at eight AM this morning."

What happened to them...? "But there's no records of what they were doing before they appeared here?"

"Yes. Which is very strange. The only way I can explain it is to say that these two men did not exist until they were killed, or that they were brought here to be killed from some day other than July 24th."

"You can't check records from yesterday or any other day?"

"Videodrome can only check the day of. From midnight until midnight."

"And that only gives us one second? Or, I suppose, if we look at it from another angle, they could have died a second after midnight. And the estimated time of death is what's wrong."

"....." He had no answer to that.

I had Abbacchio replay the recordings, and did my best to soak in every detail. Just like Tsukumojuku used to do. If the facts were as stated, they'd been dead most of the day. Comparing the 3D images Videodrome made with the actual bodies, and considering this house appeared to have some sort of temperature control that kept it cool, even though it was summer, the condition of the bodies seemed to support that. I spent a bit of time looking from one to the other like I was trying to find the six differences, but nothing stood out. "Hmm, guess these god damn gangsters ain't trying to pull one over on us with their Stands," said NYPD Blue. He'd come up beside me at some point.

"Eh? Yo, nitwit, the fuck you joining in for? Get back here!" Njimura Fukashigi yelled, but NYPD Blue was having none of it.

"Shut the fuck up! This is a murder investigation! No damn way I'm leaving it up to some amateur!" He turned to me. "Sorry, buddy. Please, go on." Go on with what? I didn't have anything! But I went ahead and said, "Right!" and turned back to the bodies, and I guess because I'd been distracted, I noticed something. Kira's face was covered in sweat, and it was dripping off his face onto his shirt, but it dried the instant it hit. The way snow vanishes as soon as it hits the ground.

? What did this mean? Sweat fell from his cheeks to his chest, but never landed. Could sweat really evaporate that quick?

I started to reach out, then asked, "Does touching these let us feel the bodies?"

Abbacchio nodded. "But it is a recording, so even if your hands or clothes appear to get blood on them, it's only temporary."

"Oh, yeah?" I said, and, not making a big deal about it, I just reached out and touched Kira's shirt. There was no undershirt or anything between with the shirt and his skin, but it was dry as a bone. As sweaty as his face was, the rest of his body should be soaked, but the shirt wasn't even damp. I wasn't up on advances in the textile industry since my day, but sweat generally took a bit of

time to dry. It didn't just evaporate like it was dropped on a hot frying pan. If he'd been volcanic rock hot, I could see it, but from touching him I could tell he was a little warm, but well within the range of normal. This had to be a clue, I thought. "What? There something wrong with Kira Yoshikage's chest?" Abbacchio asked. He was standing next to me, watching my face intently. "...you found something? Don't even think about keeping it secret. Tell the truth now. I used to be a cop. I can tell if you're lying."

I wasn't a good liar in the first place. But before I answered, the Stand behind me said, "Woah there, punk. You used to be a police? Then you know the drill. Before you resort to brow beating, have a think for your damn self." And with that, NYPD Blue reached out and started pawing Kira's clothes himself. "Hmm. I think you just might be on to something."

"Tch," Abbacchio said, and stepped up next to NYPD Blue, putting his hands on the dead man's chest. Kira was looping rapidly, letting out shout after shout as his throat split opened and snapped closed again and again. I moved on to Diavolo, who was stuck in a very similar loop, and began watching him closely. Since I knew what I was looking for, I found it quick. A drop of sweat from his cheek that fell on his shoulder and was gone. Same thing. I reached out and touched the thin shirt that clung to Diavolo's body, but it was dry, too. He, too, was sweating all over, but...just to be sure, I peeled back his shirt, and put my hand inside. Yep. Diavolo's belly was drenched. But none of it got to his shirt. How could that be? "All three of you are acting like total freaks," Mista said, and he and Fugo cackled wildly, but I ignored it. There was something here. How could something like this happen?

This wasn't some insta-drying shirt. If it was, Abbacchio and NYPD Blue would have pointed it out. Precisely because this was impossible, the two of them were looking baffled, and investigating further, ignoring the hecklers.

So if it wasn't a fast drying shirt, then...fast drying sweat? That seemed equally unlikely. No matter when I was, sweat was

sweat. Physics remained physics. Drying takes time. Hmm...but to what extent did physics apply here?

Look at what lay just in front of me. A tangible recording of a human's death. A humanoid superpower investigating a crime of its own free will. Everyone here was beyond my experience. They could turn books into phones, replace skulls with soap, and make six little drag queens ride bullets.

The entire situation was fucked up. A town upside-down in the ocean, surrounded by an invisible wall. The fish swimming past us weren't gigantic; we'd been shrunk somehow. Could we judge anything based on conventional physics?

We couldn't. It seemed there were still rules in effect, but physics were only relevant to a limited extent. This was the work of a Stand; this sweat, this instant death, and the way he dragged them into this room and killed them without them even trying to resist.

If physics didn't apply, then perhaps things that should take time not taking time was...wait...time?

Kira Yoshikage's Stand, Killer Queen, could turn time back an hour with Bites the Dust.

Diavolo's King Crimson could predict the future, and erase that time.

Both Stand powers involved time. And both owners of those Stands lay here dead, together.

Speaking of time, Tsukumojuku had fallen through time from England in 1904 to Japan in 2012, and then time traveled two more times before dying.

And there was one more.

"Mister Kishibe," I said. The thin artist turned towards me. "Didn't you say something about a clock?"

"I did!" he exclaimed, thrilled someone had actually heard him. He strode forward. "There was a clock right here, in my study, on this very desk! And it's gone missing! It was the only way I had of telling time in this windowless room! It was hardly a valuable piece, so I'll gladly buy whoever took it one of their own, but I'd

like mine back, thank you!"

"What for?" Mista said. "Just buy a new one for yourself! Sensei ♡!"

"I have affection for my own things!" Kishibe snapped with such vigor that Mista actually backed off.

"Uh, no need to shout," he said. Kishibe had a knack for making everything he said sound oddly convincing. "I mean, sure, I get you. I care about my stuff, too," Mista said.

"So give it back! I won't let anyone leave until it's returned!" I thought the gangsters were keeping Kishibe here, but apparently he'd just turned those tables on them. I could hear people laughing quietly, impressed with his bravado, but I put my mind to thinking. A missing clock?

There must be a reason for that. If Kishibe was telling the truth, and it was a cheap clock, there was no benefit to stealing it. Unless whoever stole it had a reason to think having a clock here would be bad news for them.

Again, "time". That was the key word behind all of this. The only problem was how?

Time for sweat to dry. Why did it dry in an instant? Ignore physics, and find the answer! Push through it! Sweat wouldn't dry instantly. It took time to dry. It only appeared to take no time. That amount of time was sped up to look like only a moment. It looked instantaneous, but it was no such thing.

And by the same principle, the second it took to kill these two was not actually a second. A much longer period of time just looked like a second.

Time had been sped up.

And he'd hidden the clock so we wouldn't noticed this had happened.

That was it, I thought. I was confident I had the answer.

But thought they were clearly sped up, neither of them were

moving like they were in a movie being cranked too fast. Human bodies are never completely still, so when sped up their movements are always jerky, clearly unnatural to our eyes. But there was nothing unnatural about the way they were moving, or even the speed of the blood as it came gushing out of them.

Only the sweat was strange. It formed on the cheeks slowly, like normal, then pooled and swelled and dangled and fell and dried unnaturally fast. Not just that. If this was all happening normally, I'd be able to put my hand beneath his chin, and catch the drop of sweat as it fell. But the speed of their sweat was so unnatural I couldn't figure out the timing of that. What did that mean?

The people were moving normally, but their sweat was sped up...the instant it left their cheeks, it fell and dried really fast. Hmm. The instant it left their cheeks?

So human skin was the borderline...border surface. And the flow of time was different within and without? Was it possible for time to flow differently inside your body than outside?

It must be. Otherwise this situation wasn't possible. Proof lay in the Stands these two had. Killer Queen could make someone explode so hard they had to relive the last hour over again, but only the person who exploded remembered what had happened. Which meant time flowed differently for the bomb guy alone.

King Crimson worked the same. Diavolo could predict the future and delete that amount of time, so if events happened in the following flow: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, and he deleted B, then for everyone but Diavolo events would flow as $A \rightarrow C$, but for Diavolo things would be $A \rightarrow$ His prediction of $B \rightarrow$ deleting $B \rightarrow C$, extended by the act of using his Stand, but changing the flow of time for everyone else.

In other words, time could flow differently inside a person and out. Most of the time, those times synced up, but if this type of Stand was used, they'd stop lining up. Diavolo created a smaller disconnect, but with Killer Queen, whoever he'd turned into a bomb would repeat that time more often the more they got scared and tried to get help. The gap between their time and real time would

get bigger and bigger.

And wasn't our internal sense of time always a little off? Even without the involvement of Stands? I couldn't begin to believe that the time I'd spent being bullied on the Canary Islands, the time I'd spent fighting in the war, and the time I'd spent gazing at Lisa Lisa's hair streaming in the wind and gleaming in the sunlight could all have been flowing at the same speed.

And the time I'd spent facing Antonio Torres inside William Cardinal in the Motorize Manor definitely didn't flow at the same speed as the time I'd spent deducing things next to a pair of corpses surrounded by gangsters here. When we concentrate, the flow of time within us speeds up. We can think an incredible number of things in mere minutes, seconds even, so compared to the external time, the time insides us passes in a flash. Like, wait, had it really only been a minute? So right this very moment as the wheels in my head spun furiously, I was building up a gap between my internal time and the time outside of me. If time within a human being was different from time outside of us, then if you were to control one of these times, which would it be? Killer Queen turned back time inside the bomb person only, and King Crimson deleted a portion of time that only he had experienced from the timeline outside of him. And here some unknown individual's Stand had sped up the external time for Diavolo and Kira.

This one second they spent yelping and dying might well be only a second for them, but externally a much longer period of time was taking place, super compressed.

I wasn't yet sure how long that was. But at the least, I had solved the mystery of the sweat. And I suppose I had also explained how no one had witnessed their murders. "Mister Kishibe, is it at all possible that this room could have been left empty for say, an hour, around eight this morning?"

"Hunh? No way," Kishibe said. "That would have been the absolute busiest time. All the cops flooding in because we'd found Tsukumojuku's body."

"Okay." Yeah, it wasn't just their murders nobody had seen; nobody had seen the bodies lying on the floor. So it seemed likely time had been sped up around them from midnight to the estimated time of death to the time they were found. If he would compress eight hours to a second to kill them why not keep it up and do another twelve, bringing us to eight PM, the present time?

If eight hours took a second, and midnight to right now was twenty hours, then that was about 2.5 seconds. It was not out of the question for there to be 2.5 seconds in which nobody was in this study. Assuming the same scale; obviously they could have sped things up even more after their deaths and made those twelve hours into one second or .1 seconds but for the moment I just needed a figure to theorize with, so let's go with 2.5 seconds. They were both killed in the first second, and in the next 1.5 seconds twelve hours worth of decomposition occurred. In only 1.5 seconds?

Looking at the bodies, this had clearly happened, but...was there any way to be sure? "Mr. Kishibe, do you happen to have a body thermometer?"

Kishibe grinned at me. "I do! Are you planning on doing an autopsy?"

I was a bit taken aback, but I guess it wasn't out of character for this guy. "Yeah. If you've got anything else that would help..."

"I do indeed!" Kishibe said, far too happily. "I'm drawing a horror mystery manga, you see. I was curious to know just what coroners do! I've never tried them on a real dead human, but you find dead birds and cats as you wander around town, and they were most illuminating."

"....."

I wasn't the only one who'd gone quiet, but Kishibe paid no heed at all, and began expounding the details of his experiments on dead animals until his girlfriend put her hand over his mouth. "Uh? Mmph...oh, the body thermometer, right. I'll bring the whole kit."

"...thanks." I turned the duo glaring at the mystery of the dry clothes in Videodrome's recordings. "Abbacchio, NYPD, I'll need

your help with this."

"....?" Mm? What?" Abbacchio and NYPD Blue had clearly both been so preoccupied they'd missed what we'd just said.

"We're going to perform a simple autopsy," I said. "Mind taking the rectal temperature?"

"....? Whaaaaaat?" "Now look here, buddy, I'm just a regular police, I ain't up for no CSI shit." They both spoke at the same time, but when I said, "You can't let an amateur do it," they reluctantly agreed, and took the thermometer from Kishibe. He had two. "You did sterilize them, right?" Abbacchio said, suspiciously.

Kishibe was indignant. "Of course I did! How rude. Who knows what awful bacteria lurk in the guts of wild birds and cats! I washed and disinfected them!"

"Wild...birds?"

"The last time I used them was on a wild boar. It must have wandered down from the mountains and got hit by a car! But it was luckily hit in just such a manner that the body was intact, and I took a photo every hour, stuck that thermometer in its rectum, and kept detailed notes on the state of the body. I even edit together a video! If you have fifteen minutes to spare you can see a boar be entirely consumed by maggots and reduced to nothing but bone."

Abbacchio was looking a little green.

Kishibe hastily wrapped things up. "At any rate, those are quite clean."

So Abbacchio and NYPD Blue took their temperatures, and they'd both gone down between ten and eleven degrees. Helpfully, Videodrome also allowed us to measure their initial temperature, from when both were still alive. Neither Diavolo or Kira Yoshikage were at all overweight, so their temperature would drop one degree an hour, for the first ten hours, and then half a degree for every hour after that, so it fit my theory exactly.

Next we examined the inside of their mouths and their eyes. Their mucous membranes were partially dried. Corneal opacity was about half peak (usually reached between 24 and 48 hours after

death.) Then the postmortem lividity. We lifted the bodies and checked, and the coloring was pretty much at max. This hit peak after twelve hours, so was also consistent. The bodies were quite stiff, right at the peak of rigor mortis – also reached ten to twelve hours after death.

Good. "That's enough," I said. Both Abbacchio and NYPD Blue collapsed to the floor.

"Figure anything out?" Abbacchio asked, but I ignored him. I dodged the thermometer that came flying, and thought. Thought through the sound of the thermometer shattering and Kishibe's yelp of anger. Explanations should only occur after all deductions were complete. Cops are always so impatient, no matter the time or the place.

The bodies definitely had approximately twelve hours worth of decomposition. I'd been proceeding with my theory unchanged while we did the autopsy, so those first eight hours must have felt like one second to Diavolo and Kira. But their corpses seemed to have experienced the twelve hours since their deaths as twelve hours, not 2.5 seconds. So maybe this Stand's time compression somehow excluded living people?

No, humans weren't the only ones who experienced the flow of time. Animals felt it too. And zombies.

OK, if this Stand could compress time while excluding those who could perceive time, then the differential between the two flows of time left the sweat hanging off their cheeks as inside, or a part of their body, and the moment it disconnected from their jaws it became external, and not part of their body. It looked like their clothes also counted as external, but could that be because Diavolo and Kira weren't in any condition to consider their clothes as part of their self-image? In other words, what counted as internal was based on what your mental image of 'yourself' extended to, and everything else counted as internal, and thus became affected

by the other flow of time.

So, I thought. Next. I had the killer's profile. He was a Stand Master with a Stand that could speed up time. He'd killed Diavolo and Kira in that sped up time. Slit their throats.

But was it really possible to cut a living person's throat this deep, this easily?

Neither one of them was bound in any way. And they were Stand Masters, so even if they couldn't move their Stands should have been free. Had the Stand Master been hiding somewhere, so they couldn't fight back? That didn't make sense. Diavolo had his Stand out, and King Crimson would know the attack was coming and make it so the attack never happened. Kira, too; if he just used Killer Queen he could make anything it touched explode or turn into a bomb, but somehow he couldn't defend himself? They were up against a Stand that could speed up time. There was a rule that there could only be one Stand per person, which meant we could also say that the killer couldn't do anything else. His Stand couldn't hide him.

The only thing you could do with sped up time was move really fast. But was it that hard to avoid an opponent who was just moving fast when you had bombs at your disposal?

I wasn't sure, so I did the math on it, and if eight hours were passing in a single second, and the killer came running at Diavolo and Kira at ten kilometers an hour, then relative to them he'd be going 288,000 kph. 800,000 meters a second. 241 times the speed of sound. That seemed pretty fucking insane. How would you even think to put a bomb out?

At any rate, they clearly couldn't use their Stands. Or didn't. Why? Was their opponent too fast for them to do anything? If he really was going 241 times the speed of sound that made sense. But they both had glazed over eyes, and were just staring at nothing, not even trying to resist. They looked like they'd already given up. But

this was a mafia boss, who'd led a group of Stand Master gangsters like Giovanna, and a serial killer who's survived in a small town like Morioh while being chased by multiple other Stand Masters. Would they simultaneously give up on surviving this and just wait to die?

No, no, absolutely not. Diavolo's predictions used his own internal time so it would still work, and however fast the killer was going he'd still predict the attack ten seconds ahead of time and make it not happen. He would have done that. Any soldier would. No soldier stood around with their gun holstered waiting to be shot. No matter how fucked you were if you still had your knife you'd use that, and if you were out of bullets you could use the pommel, and if your dander was up you'd give it a shot bare handed, and if you were so gravely wounded you couldn't move you could still try and bite them.

But they didn't even try to resist, I thought, forcing myself to think this through. What if they were in a situation where they couldn't use their Stands, or thought it wasn't necessary?

Couldn't use them? They were uninjured until their throats split open, and if they themselves weren't hurt, their Stands should have been just fine, too. And vice versa. There was no way they couldn't have used their Stands.

So if they thought they didn't need to? Hmm, yeah, that had to be it, it's the only thing that made sense, after all they were both sweating fiercely and yelping aloud, too surprised and confused to realize they were in danger. But what was it that surprised them? What confused them?

Since the enemy Stand had sped up time, had the world in front of them turned into a swirling maelstrom?

I looked around me. They'd died in this study, with nothing in it but a desk. There were no windows in the walls, just doors. No windows in the ceiling, either. What would change here even if an hour was compressed down to a second?

Most likely nothing would change at all. There was nothing

here I could see that would provoke such surprise or confusion.

So what got to them?

If there was nothing around them, then someone other than themselves must have been here, and that couldn't be the killer. The killer slit both their throats without them noticing. He would have been hiding. So what did Diavolo and Kira see, and what thoughts ran through their head that rattled them like that?

Each other.

Two Stand Masters who could control time.

A mafia boss and a serial killer.

And Giovanna and Kishibe seemed to believe they were the source of whatever power made Nero Nero Island and Morioh start moving.

They were together when they died. Why?

Because they were fighting.

I had it at last.

Kira Yoshikage's Stand, Killer Queen, had a 3rd power called Bites the Dust that turned people into bombs that would go off if anyone tried to find him through that person, and when it went off it would send them back in time an hour to start over. For a serial killer who wanted only to live his life without attracting attention, this was the ideal power. The bomb would go off if they so much as said his name, and if anyone unwanted died in the blast, he could just defuse the bomb after winding back an hour, and undo the fated death. But the one flaw is that the person he'd primed retained their memories and time, but Kira himself had no way of grasping what was happening. Since he had no idea who his bomb was killing, he had no way of knowing who was coming after him, and unless he looked into it, he had no way of knowing just how close they were getting.

Of course, he could just keep his distance from the person he'd turned into a bomb, and preserve his peaceful life that way, but

while it was active he couldn't use any of Killer Queen's other powers, so he was left rather defenseless. And even if he was forced to defuse Bites the Dust without knowing what was going on with it, he might leave people after him alive, inadvertently sparing them their explosive fate. He'd have to make sure that didn't happen. And the only way to do that was to get close to the bomb, which also put him at risk of encountering those after him.

The only way to compensate for this flaw was to avoid the fear and trouble caused by distance from the bomb, and become the bomb himself. Killer Queen's normal abilities were enough to kill anyone who got in his way normally, but by using Bites the Dust on himself, he could reset an hour of time when it went off, figure out a better way to kill whoever was after him, and correct any errors he'd made. He'd gain knowledge, experience, and foresight. Since he was a serial killer trying to hide his true identity, he had to pick the time and place to safely blow up his enemies, but Bites the Dust made that discretion unnecessary. No matter who was watching, he could just blow up whoever he wanted to. Then go back an hour, wait until the time that enemy blew up, at which point fate would kill them off for him, leaving no one around with any idea why they suddenly blew up. That hour reset was very effective.

So, with a detective dead and more detectives gathering in Morioh, Kira set Bites the Dust on himself so he could be prepared for anything. At which point Diavolo appeared.

What would happen then?

Kira's Bites the Dust would activate, trying to kill Diavolo, but Diavolo's King Crimson would sense that future, and prevent it from ever happening. But since the result of the explosion was that time was fated to turn back an hour, Bites the Dust would still send him back. But in that case, Kira would have no memories of having blown Diavolo up, so he'd try to blow Diavolo up again, King Crimson would delete it again, but the hour reset was still fated to happen – so every time Diavolo deleted his own death, time would be reset an hour. Kira and Diavolo would be trapped in an infinite

time loop.

The only one who could change fate in that hour was Kira, and the only way to escape the time loop was to defuse Bites the Dust, but when a serial killer and a mafia boss were facing off, was that something that would even occur to him? Especially since Kira would know that time was resetting, know he must have blown someone up, but have no memory of doing so. That would make him incredibly nervous. Kira had no way of knowing what King Crimson's power was, so his best option would always appear to be attacking him with Bites the Dust again. But no matter how hard he tried to get rid of Diavolo, Diavolo could make all his attacks not happen. And yet, the more desperate Kira got, the more he'd depend on Bites the Dust somehow bringing a better result. The time loop they were trapped in would shift a bit here and there, but essentially continue.

I was pretty sure that was the basic gist of it, anyway. Like Tsukumojuku always said, "When you're right, you know it without verifying." For the first time, I knew what he meant. He wasn't just referring to confidence. Detectives (and me) didn't just believe in themselves. They believed in everything.

The world. And God. They were convinced that the state of all things existed for themselves. That gave Beyond power, and Beyond gave them power.

With Beyond on my side, I could move forward without hesitation. To the next problem – why did this have to happen at the Arrow Cross House?

The flow of time was divided by human consciousness. Was it possible for a Stand attack to penetrate that fuzzy barrier?

No, and nor had they. If Diavolo and Kira had had their own perceptions of time sped up, that time would vanish at the moment

of their deaths, the sped up effect would end, and their bodies would be left lying on the study floor. But despite no such thing happening, their bodies had begun to decompose, and Kishibe and the police had gone in and out of the room without ever seeing the two bodies because time in the Arrow Cross House room had been sped up. Arrow Cross House could do that. Strictly speaking, the former version of it, Cube House.

A house was not a person. A house had no consciousness. With any normal house, if the killer's Stand tried to speed up time it would be left manipulating the boundless infinity of space time. Manipulating time for the world itself. And not just Earth, but all of the universe, which I could not begin to imagine, but even if that was possible, once time sped up humans would notice that it wasn't matching up to their internal time, and panic. For a killer just trying to kill two men in secret, mass hysteria was less than ideal. But the Arrow Cross House, the Cube House, was no ordinary house.

It was a Stand. The area of consciousness of a Stand with a human name, Sugimoto Reimi. Its construction contained a space time of its own. A **Tesseract**. Arrow Cross House was built on top of the Cube House.

With that in mind, I asked Kishibe, "Bring me all the clocks not in the study."

Kishibe grinned at me. "You're starting to act like an old-time detective! No explanations along the way, hunh?" He and the other Japanese people started gathering clocks. How did modern detectives act?

One clock from each of the four sunrooms, four clocks in all. I inspected them. All clocks showed the same time, 8:13 PM. "What the fuck, even the second hands are perfectly in sync! Hella creepy, Rohan!" "You seriously need a shrink," the massive twins said, but Rohan was having none of it. "I'm simply not as sloppy as you nitwits."

I absently checked my own watch. 11:15 AM. I should be in the middle of the wedding ceremony, putting a ring on Lisa Lisa.

Making my vows. Maybe defending myself after a service buddy jokingly objected to the wedding taking place. But I hadn't lost that time. It might be in the past, but the past still existed, and I'd get back there somehow....!

I put my head back to deducing. The sped up effect occurred in this study. Put another way, it didn't happen in the additions that turn the place into the Arrow Cross House. The border was defined by the Cube House.

"Reimi, mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure," she said, and trotted over to me. "Solving things is going swimmingly, is it?"

Swimmingly? Did it look like that? I was taken aback for a moment, then I realized time was flowing differently inside me than it was for the rest of them.

"Reimi, I wanted to ask about this building...about the Cube House."

"Yes, yes?"

From what she told me, the 'facts' that Cube House had been in Nishi Akatsuki and that it had been moved to Morioh were both second-hand, and all she remembered was finding herself here in Morioh, as the Arrow Cross House, with next to no memories of anything that came before. "Stands can grow. They unexpectedly evolve," Kishibe added. He'd been listening to us talk. "It's only natural you're not the person you were then, Sugimoto." I suppose he meant that to be comforting, and she smiled back, but I spied a trace of sadness to it. The sadness of not being the person you once were, or of not having memories of your past was not something a full throttle forward type like Kishibe couldn't really understand. "Muryotaisu's Grand Blue have increased in number. That sort of thing happens all the time," Kishibe said.

"Has anyone else lost their memories when that happened?" I asked.

"Eh? No, not the human Master. But the Stands themselves have been known to change inside and out, so it stands to reason

they might wind up completely overwriting the old version."

Reimi looked even more downcast. Time was flowing for her, too. I couldn't help myself. "Kishibe, have you ever felt the fear of forgetting what happened to you? Ever felt like you'd lost time you knew you'd lived through?"

"Nothing frightening about it," Kishibe said, and it didn't seem like he was bluffing. "The vast majority of my life contains nothing of any consequence whatsoever. I've thrown all of myself into drawing manga, so that's all there is!" He hmphed arrogantly. Reimi just gaped at him.

At this point the Japanese kids behind me, Hirose and the twins, put their two cents in. "Jeez, Rohan, you're being a real jerk here!" "That ain't Jorge's point! Don't you get that?" "C'mon, use your imagination! Man, you're useless when you aren't in front of the drawing board." Something in that seemed to get through to him and he abruptly turned towards Reimi.

"Eh? Ah! Oh, no! I wasn't thinking! Just because I'd be fine doesn't mean you are! Sorry, how thoughtless of me!"

He clapped his hands together in front of him and bowed his head low, and this was so desperate that Reimi almost burst out laughing. Ptbbbbbb. "OK, that's enough, Rohan! You really do live for manga, don't you? I understand the point you're making, too."

"No, I'm really sorry. I sometimes forget to distinguish between myself and other people, and assume everyone else can do what I can do. Other manga artists criticize me for that all the time. I'm really not trying to be a conceited ass! I just expect too much from people! That's entirely my fault!"

"That's the most arrogant thing you've said yet!" "What the? You expect too much from people? Just how amazing do you think you are!?" "Ah ha ha ha! You gotta be kidding! That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Hirose collapsed, laughing hysterically. I'd assumed Kishibe was joking, too, but he seemed genuinely pissed at us.

"What's so funny!?! Kouji! I'm trying to apologize seriously

here, and you mock me for it!?"

Eh? Seriously? Hirose's laughter subsided, replaced with a look of glazed horror. Reimi laughed. "You're hopeless, Rohan!"

I didn't have enough hours in the world to deal with this, so I got the conversation back on track. "Reimi, I get that you're a very unusual stand, but fundamentally every Stand has a 'Master' and they're job is to 'stand by' that Master, right? I would definitely say a Stand forgetting their Master is kind of an exception, a pretty unique situation. Especially for Stands with minds of their own, forgetting their Master when they 'grow' or 'evolve' would be kind of a big problem."

Reimi looked very serious suddenly, and the others went quiet to listen.

"That's why I don't think you grew or evolved. I think it was more like...something shocking happened to you." Shocking? I was aware of something rather like that.

Trauma.

Wounds.

Harm sustained could give you power.

"Reimi, do you remember being injured, or suffering in any way?" I asked. Her eyes really did look like a human's. There was a light in them, and that light went out at my question. It was like I was tumbling into a deep abyss within them. My words had struck a nerve. "A wound," I said, the certainty of Beyond behind me.

"I..." she said, and the light in her eyes flickered back on. The words she'd bottled up inside came flowing out. "My back...it's been hurting for a while."

"? Your back?"

"Yeah. Oh..." Reimi went beet red. She screwed her eyes shut, and grit her teeth.

"Hunh? Sugimoto..." Kishibe said. "What are you doing?"

"....ah! Ah. Ahh. Ahhhhhhhh!" Her breathing heavy, Reimi's

body suddenly jerked as if stabbed in the back. She hastily pulled the straps of her dress off her shoulders, and pulled her top down, baring her back. Sleazeball gangsters started making wolf-whistles and one even let out a particularly creepy "Ohhhhh!" and then an arrow showed up, right between her shoulder blades, and not just some symbol but an actual arrowhead inside her, raising the surface of her skin as it moved, and it looks so painful and uncanny that we all went deathly silent.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh! It's burning up! It's on fire, Rohan!" Reimi screamed, and the skin on her back split open, and the arrowhead came sliding out onto the smooth surface, but no blood came with it. The arrowhead looked to be made of stone, and had elaborate carvings along the surface of it. Free of her body, it dropped to the floor, and Reimi collapsed beside it.

"Sugimoto! Are you...!?" Kishibe yelled, rushing to her side.

Breathing heavily, she said, "I remember now, Rohan. About myself, and about my Master." She picked the arrowhead up off the floor. "I was asked to keep this arrowhead, and make sure nobody else took it. I locked myself up inside the Cube House, but then I accidentally – or maybe not, I'm not sure, but I stabbed myself with it." She moved the tip of the arrow head near her arm, and a strange wind swept up around it as if the arrowhead itself was pulling her skin towards it.

This was clearly no ordinary arrowhead; it had a mind of its own.

She pulled the arrow away from her skin, took a moment to catch her breath, and turned to me. "I remember now. It's been such a long time, Jorge Joestar."

She smiled at me, as if looking at an old photograph.

".....? You know me?"

"Of course. I've been searching for you for a long time. And protecting this arrowhead. I know why I came to Morioh, too. I was waiting for you to get here. All this time."

".....? What do you mean?"

"I mean I love you."

".....!"

I wasn't the only one blown away by that. Kishibe was left speechless, and the twins and Hirose all shrieked.

Reimi turned to find Kishibe gaping at her. She smiled at him. "Well, not me. My Master loves him. Obviously. I, myself, have never even met Jorge."

A high-pitched whine left Kishibe, like a leaky balloon, and then he made a show of coughing. "Well, that's not my problem," he said.

The twins and Hirose all relaxed and began chattering at Kishibe, but I ignored them. "So who is your Master?"

"There's only one girl waiting for you who can make locked rooms. Penelope de la Roza. Jorge, honestly. How could you not know that already? Boys are the worst."

It was very like Penelope to treat a man about to turn thirty-one like a 'boy'.

"So! Let's get back to Penelope, Jorge," Reimi said, standing up.

"Yo, wait, you think we're just gonna let you leave?" Mista snarled.

"Yeah, Jorge," Fugo said. "You still haven't figured out who killed Diavolo."

"Why should he?" Reimi said. "Jorge has no obligation to do that whatsoever."

"Obligation? We aren't talking about no 'obligation' here," Mista said. He was smiling, but his eyes were narrowing. "We ain't asking, either. We're telling him to do it. However he has to."

"Hmph," Reimi snorted. "You can act like big shots all you like, but remember where you are. You're inside me."

Right. We were inside Reimi. Inside the realm of Reimi's consciousness, so if time sped up here, it wouldn't affect anything

outside.

"A moment ago I became my old self," Reimi said. "This isn't the old Arrow Cross. The arrow's not in me any more. This is the Cube House now. It has no doors or windows. If you don't do as I say, you're never getting out of here. And remember, when I say 'never', I mean that literally."

"What!?" Fugo and Mista ran to the doors and flung them open.

"Shit! The furniture's still here, but no doors or windows!" "Fuck! A polar bear! Tch, why the fuck is this thing here!?" "Wait, wait, wait...why is your face over there!" "Mista? What are you doing back there?"

As the two henchmen encountered the tesseract for the first time, Giovanna rose to his feet.

"It looks to me like you've already figured everything out," he said. "Joestar. Will you share your answer with us?"

I ran over my reasoning – if I could call it that – in my mind again. I knew what the killer's Stand must be. I could sketch a fairly complete picture of how he'd done it. There weren't any mitigating circumstances that countermanded it. But I didn't have the killer's name...what had Tsukumojuku done in moments like this?

He'd just left it up to the mood, or the energy in the room. By acting the part, he'd get things going his way. That was what all detectives did.

They'd create the flow, create the mood. The same way that Beyond did.

Believe.

"I dunno the killer's name," I said. "But I know their Stand. It has the power to speed up time. They lured Kira Yoshikage and Diavolo here. Kira had primed Bites the Dust on himself. The killer set them against each other, had them attack, and King Crimson deleted the moment where Bites the Dust blew him up. With both still alive, Bites the Dust turned back time an hour, and brought the same fate around again. As time began to loop, the same events

happening again and again, the killer sped up time, compressing it until neither of them could move at all. Then he slit their throats."

When I finished my speech, there was a long silence. Over by the corpses and Videodromes, Abbacchio and NYPD Blue were gaping at me. "I see...!" Giovanna said, trying unsuccessfully but adorably to conceal his surprise. "That's all," I said. "I don't have anything else worked out yet. But it seems like you might know something about a Stand that speeds up time, right?"

Giovanna had been so quietly calm all this time. Why had that description rattled him so? But he just shook his head.

"No idea, I'm afraid."

".....? So why were you so surprised..." No, maybe this wasn't surprise. There was a sadness in his eyes. "Why was this such a shock to you?"

As if that brought him back to himself, Giovanna's usual mask slipped back over his features.

"It didn't."

There was clearly something here. Something not right. "Is your boss lying?" I said, turning to Bruno Buccellati. He'd been watching everything closely from behind Giovanna.

Giovanna spun around, not expecting this, and his eyes must have met Buccellati's.

".....!"

Buccellati didn't answer immediately. ".....? Mmm? ...I can smell it, Giorno. A smell I shouldn't be smelling."

"Buccellati, don't."

"I shouldn't ever be smelling this in my own family, on my own team. So why the hell am I?"

"You're imagining it."

"I'm WHAT!?" Buccellati roared.

Mista and Fugo came running back to the study.

"What's up, Buccellati?"

"Shut the fuck up, Fugo!" Buccellati snapped, seething with rage. His men fell silent. "This stench just got even more distinct. Giorno! You just lied to me! I'm not imagining this shit! You know damn well I can smell a lie a mile away! I've proven it countless times, Giorno! My nose for lies! Is! Never! Wrong! You're keeping something from us!"

".....!"

"I don't even need to lick that cold sweat off your brow! You're lying! Spit it out, Giorno! What the fuck are you hiding!?"

"I..." Giorno said, then sighed. "I was just a bit thrown by Joestar's reasoning. I mean, this Stand speeds up time? How would you ever fight that?"

He wasn't a Mafia leader for nothing. He'd recovered his calm, and the cold sweat was gone.

Wait. The sweat that was on his shirt...was already gone?

"LIAR!" Buccellati screamed. Then he grew deathly quiet. "Giorno...tell me the truth. If you're hiding something, I have to dig after it. It can't be that important! I'm not saying we can't have secrets from each other. I respect your privacy. This line of work, that's all we have sometimes. But right here? When Passione's top dog has just been murdered? There's nothing worth hiding, Giorno! Say it, Giornooooo! Say it!" he rose to a shriek at the end, and his Stand appeared behind him. It looked like a girl, and held a needle and thread in its hands.

"Don't, Buccellati!"

"If you don't tell the truth I'll stitch your mouth closed! Do it, Stepmom!"

As the female Stand grabbed Giovanna's lips together, stuck the needle through them, pulled the thread after, and began sewing them together at fearsome speeds, Giovanna yelled, "Buccellati, no! I'm not the one lying! I was lied to!"

"What?" Buccellati said, and stopped sewing.

"I'm the one who was betrayed."

"What do you mean!? Betrayed by who!?"

"....." Giovanna fell silent.

Behind me, NYPD Blue suddenly said, "Mm? The fuck is this?"

I turned around and found NYPD Blue still examining the bodies. His hands were on Diavolo's corpse's face, but they weren't just resting there. Diavolo's face had opened up, and he was looking inside. Kishibe Rohan's Stand, Heaven's Door, which turned people into books filled with their memories and history. NYPD Blue and Abbacchio had a brief whispered conversation about something, and then Abbacchio turned to me. "What do you make of this?"

Diavolo's face was in book form, the pages spread open. The pages were all covered with the word 'death' in all kinds of languages, but Abbacchio was pointing at the very bottom corner of the page, some tiny, tiny letters in either corner.

The right page read 121. The left read 123.

"Hunh?" I said. This was weird.

"Right?" Abbacchio said, and flipped to a different page.

The right read 237. The left read 239.

It only had odd pages.

Were pages missing....? No. If that happened, two sequential pages would be missing. This was something else. I picked another page and looked at the front and back of it, and the front was 323 and the back was 325. This book only had odd numbers in it.

"What the...?" I looked up, and Kishibe had come up behind us, and was peering over our shoulders.

"Any idea what this means?" I asked.

Kishibe put his hand to his lips.

"I've never seen anything like it. I can only think of one explanation."

NYPD Blue and Abbacchio said as one, "Someone else had the even pages."

Kishibe said much the same thing. "I stopped looking when

I saw the word 'death' everywhere! How careless of me! Diavolo had a split personality!"

"C'mon, Giorno! Spit it out!" Buccellati yelled. "Who is it who betrayed you?"

"I don't know..." Giovanna said, his eyes hollow. "God?"

"Don't you even dream about fucking with me right now!" Buccellati yelled. Stepmom sewed more of Giovanna's mouth shut, and threw a few stitches through his cheek as well, completely wrecking his even features. "Tell me the damn truth, Giorno! You're our fucking boss! What the fuck are you up to!?"

"I'm telling the truth! I've been betrayed by God!"

"Arghhhhh! Grit your fucking teeth, Giorno!"

Wham! Buccellati just straight up punched Giovanna in the face.

Reimi squeaked, and hid behind Kishibe. The twins and Hirose were completely at a loss now, frozen in place.

Blood sprayed from Giovanna's mouth, and tears from his eyes. ...he was crying? Blood and tears fell to the floor. The blood dried, and the tears vanished.

In an instant.

Kishibe spoke up. "I've looked inside almost everyone alive in here, so Heaven's Door could make you all able to speak all three languages. Only two people I haven't looked at! Giovanna, who could already speak Japanese and Italian! And the empty-eyed boy who showed up late, following Giovanna. Vinegar Doppio! Where is he?"

NYPD Blue and Abbacchio looked around, but there was no sign of Doppio. "Hunh? He was just here!"

"Shit! Where is he?" Kishibe yelled. "Find him! Jacques! Enzo! Johana!" Nijimura Muryotaisu yelled, unleashing his Stand,

which looked like three dolphins.

"Might be faster to call him," Abbacchio said, grabbing Pink Dark Boy off the floor. A moment later, plu pon pin para para pon plu pon pin para para pon rang from under the floor.

"(Click) Hello Hi What's up? Call me anytime! I'm shiny sparkling Doppio and I love phones!"

His bright voice and then some dolphins squeaking and he yelped.

"Augh! What the fuck!?"

"Bring him back here, Grand Blue!" Muryotaisu yelled and the hole in the center of the study slammed open and a dolphin flew up out of it with Doppio on its back, and the door in the ceiling opened and the other two came back as well.

"Hey? What the fuck, I'm on the phone!" Doppio snarled, holding his shoe to his ear, barely holding onto the dolphin with his other hand.

"Ha! Trying to run!?" Kishibe cried. "You can't escape from the Cube House! Heaven's Door!" I wasn't super sure why he was shouting his Stand's name, but he rapidly drew a transparent figure in the air and Doppio's face exploded. The pages of his book flew open, his hand slipped off the dolphin's fin and he fell to the floor, rolling several times. "Everything you said was half-crazed and I've had my eye on you! Let's have a look!" Kishibe strode over to him, and checked the pages of Doppio's book.

"Hunh?" he said, flipping through several more pages. "He's got odd and even numbers! He's normal! He's just a bit nutty!" Kishibe cried.

All eyes shifted towards the only other candidate.

With all eyes on him, Giovanna stared off in to space, and whispered, "Are you abandoning me, God?"

Another tear rolled down his cheek, but the moment the tear left him, it sped up, and evaporated before it hit the floor.

"Something stinks!" NYPD Blue yelled.

"The bodies are rotting faster!" Abbacchio yelled.

Time inside the Cube House had sped up again.

"Yes, he has. Can you blame Him for it? *Giorno Giovanna*."

The speaker was a man standing in the door to the North, dressed in a form-fitting silver garment that looked like something out of an H. G. Wells novel. There was a cross on the front. Who...?

The Japanese twins and Hirose yelled, "Enrico Pucci!"

So that was the name of the man who could speed up time.

"God is gravely disappointed in your weakness," Pucci said. "*Giorno Giovanna*, you failed to bear the burden of your sins, failed to get your own hands dirty, pushed all the bad things onto a poor other mind you made within you just so you could be a good boy. Then you tried to play the hero, and punish *Diavolo* for handling you dirty deeds. What a shameful tale. Thus God forsake you. You can feel it, right? He hates sad stories like that more than anything. He won't have anything more to do with you. That's why He sent me to take care of you. You will never see His face again, but if you have any last words for him, say them now."

Giovanna wiped his tears away with his arm. "You saying that will not make me believe it, and I will not be giving you a message to take back."

Pucci said nothing, but crooked his head. ".....?"

Buccellati's half-sewn threads dangling from portions of his face, *Giovanna* smiled. "You don't get it. You aren't here to finish me off. I'll be finishing you. You're the one God has forsaken. This was always the plan, poor priest. If only you had never realized how you've been used, you might have been happy to the bitter end. But I am the son of a God who is both kind and cruel, and I must act accordingly. Father Pucci, my father never expected anything

from you. He knew you would never be able to connect the loop. That was never possible for you, or for any version of you. He sent you on this path knowing that only too well – because you being on this path was part of his plan. You are a half-formed man, driven by fruitless desire. A narrow-minded man, unable to accept anything but your own ideals. A self-absorbed low-life who has the gall to try to bask in God's love. So vain you'll do anything for a modest scrap of praise, and for a fleeting moment's emotion you'll act as if you've risen to Heaven and activate your bizarre power. He had a use for that power. But that use has been and gone. If you were but a little more rational, he might have allowed you to remain by his side, useful or not. But in the end, you are a man of no experience, incapable of deeper thought, incapable of seeing the big picture, a fool dancing at the whims of your betters. Since he saw no value in keeping you around, he has tossed you aside like yesterday's trash. Are you prepared?"

There was an awful crackling sound all around us, and the Cube House's wallpaper and carpet faded, peeled, tore, rippled, rolled, and disintegrated. Time was going faster and faster.

"Auuugh! The evidence!" I turned at the scream, and saw NYPD Blue hurriedly carrying the rapidly rotting bodies of Kira Yoshikage and Diavolo out through the east door.

In the north door, Enrico Pucci had gone beet red. "Silence, boy...!"

Giovanna laughed aloud. "See? You know I'm right. That's why you've gone red. But you don't even realize that throwing a childish tantrum to deny that fact just proves how shallow you really are."

635 "I said, shut up!"

"You mean, 'I'm so flustered I can't come up with a come back so please stop talking, sir?'"

".....!"

There was a snapping sound, and Kishibe's work desk in the center of the room collapsed. I looked at the clocks sitting on the rotting desk; those with needles had long since spun so fast the needles flew off, and those projecting numbers onto glass were changing so fast it was impossible to read the time. I could barely even read the date, but I could just about see the thousands place in the year changing. 5.....6.....9.....13....Oh, wow, I thought, they even included a fifth digit! The desk had turned to dust, and even the sturdiest of the clocks at last stopped working, and turned to dust as well.

"You're going to die! But first I'm going to slaughter all your men!" Pucci yelled, and if he used this sped up time against us there was no way we could stop him. This was well beyond mach speed. He would be moving faster than the speed of light, which was supposed to be the fastest speed possible.

But even now Giovanna just smiled. "Heh. Father Pucci, do you know what this insect is?" he said, pointing to the air.

There was a rhinoceros beetle flying there.

".....?" Pucci frowned.

"This is the arrowhead I just took from Reimi," Giovanna said. "I turned it into something living to prevent the flow of time from damaging it. Given the size, a Japanese rhinoceros beetle was a good fit. But you know, I've been thinking. Was there really only one arrowhead hidden in the Arrow Cross House?"

".....?" Pucci was still thinking.

Giovanna didn't wait for him. "I mean, there's more than one arrow outside."

"Ah! Ahhhhh! Ahhhhhhh it burns! Rohan, it burns! It's so hot I can't bear it! Auuuuughh!" Reimi screamed and grabbed onto Kishibe, her back thrashing violently as another three rhinoceros beetles surfaced on the skin of her back, tearing their way out of her.

Giovanna laughed. "Heh heh. The four rhinoceros beetles. You see your mistake now? This is the real prophecy!"

Pucci broke his silence at last.

"Noooooooooooo! It cannot be!" he yelled, trying to scream his way back to solid ground. But Giovanna pressed the advantage.

"Useless useless useless useless useless useless useless!"

The rhinoceros beetle near Giovanna's head turned back into an arrow head, and began rusting quickly in the sped up time, but he was fast enough.

There was a sound that shook the air and a yellow humanoid Stand appeared behind Giovanna just as the arrowhead stabbed it.

"Heaven's not waiting for you, Enrico Pucci! But you're such a coward you'd just speed up time in Hell to get through it! You'll get the fate you deserve – I'll trap you in the same loop you trapped Diavolo and Kira Yoshikage in when you killed them!"

"Auuuughhh!" Pucci's scream turned into a shriek. "I've had enough of your smart mouth! Children should be seen and not heard! Die!"

And he vanished.

He wasn't gone, of course. The speed of his attack was just so great we couldn't see him any more.

"Useless!" Giovanna yelled, and his Stand, which looked a bit different now that it had fused with the arrowhead, swung its fist once through the air.

And the soft sound of everything inanimate in the room crumbling beyond dust into the component elements stopped. Only

silence remained. The sped up time had stopped. I looked around me. All decorations had vanished, leaving nothing but the plain walls of the Cube House. All the Japanese and Italian gangsters were fine, standing there stunned. A thought struck me and I hastily checked my clothes, but they were intact. Good. But that didn't go for everyone; Mista's clothes had disintegrated and his fellow gang members started laughing as he smiled blissfully and bragged about how free he felt. I supposed it was up to your own consciousness where that boundary lay.

I asked Giovanna, ".....? Is it over?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"I don't see Pucci anywhere...?"

"My Stand sent him to a world where he has nowhere to go and no way of getting there," Giovanna said. He was staring at his Stand, now reborn in a new visage, covered in arrows. "That world makes all his desires and actions be in vain. This is my evolved Stand, Gold Experience Requiem. Enrico Pucci is no longer even able to *want* to come back here. No matter where he tries to go he won't be able to get there. Even if he longs for death, he won't be able to die. But if he tries to live no life worth calling such awaits him. It is not life, and not death; a place both connected to nothing and nowhere, where he'll wander lost for all of time."

"Um," I said, "Isn't that a fate worse than death?" Maybe a bit too much, really, but I let that go unsaid. I really didn't know Enrico Pucci at all.

"If you feel sympathy for him, don't bother," Giovanna said, as if he'd read my mind. "This is the fate he deserved, and at the same time, a blessing. Since this is a punishment direct from God. It is quite simple to interpret endless punishment as endless love. For a man as self-absorbed as him, he'll have done that already, and be rapturously happy."

"....." Really...? Even as I doubted it I picked up on a

mismatch bodies and the number of souls, and turned to the artist Reimi was clutching. "Kishibe."

"?"

"Heaven's Door."

Thankfully he instantly grasped my meaning. He yelled, "Heaven's Door!" and swish swish swish sketched a drawing in the air and bam! *Giorno Giovanna's* face exploded into a book. We had to catch him by surprise to get past that Stand of his. Since we'd pulled it off, I stepped in to verify. *Giorno Giovanna's* book had only one page, and the only place with anything to read was the back of the cover, his face. The page number was 2. And the text was just 'death' in all sorts of languages. OK, so he was dead. As I pulled back his page, I found a hollow within, with his eyeballs floating in the air. Our eyes met. But those eyes were something he'd made with his Stand.

Holding his cover open, I moved around his frozen body, and looked *Giovanna* in his handsome, eyeless face. "I see. You came here with *Tsukumo*, then? *Antonio Torres*."

The cover of *Giovanna's* book began to laugh. "Heh heh heh heh! God damn, *Jorge*! You're all acting like a real detective!" It was *Antonio*, so he was speaking Spanish.

I replied in kind. "I just got used to you being a constant pain in my ass."

My knees weren't shaking any more. I'd been so scared of *Antonio*, but now I'd conquered him. I should have done this from the start. Never let *Lisa Lisa* save me, but fought him myself.

Pop, pop. I looked towards the sound, and two balled up manuscript pages followed across the floor. *Giovanna's* eyes. There was a hiss as the air leaked out of the holes in his face, as *Antonio* went back to being an empty skin. Gasps went up from around us.

Giovanna was gone. Dead...? I wasn't sure.

"Heh heh! Well? Now what? *Jorge*!" *Antonio Torres* said.

On his forehead was a note written in Tsukumojuku's handwriting.

"After the monster hunt on La Palma Island. Antonio Torres, 1900."

Most likely, in all the commotion around the incident at the Torres home, he'd switched places with an ordinary skin, would up carried to school, and after the Alejandro attack Tsukumojuku had written that note on it. In other words, this was the original, before he split, the very same Antonio Torres that had tormented me years ago.

"Mm? What's up, balsa blanco? Yo! Don't fucking space out on me!"

He could yell all he liked but there wasn't much he could do in book form.

OK, I thought. What to do with this Antonio Torres? But as I thought, I found the answer to another question. "Are you the one who killed Tsukumojuku?"

Light enough to get in and out of the Arrow Cross House without crunching the gravel, but strong enough to move a human, albeit a fifteen year old boy – only this paper-thin zombie fit both conditions.

"Heh heh heh! There it is! Good job! You got old as shit but way less dumb!"

Yeah, kinda of a lot happened. I didn't have time to catch up with him, though. "But you couldn't have done it all alone," I said. "I mean, they were arranged to look like Japanese folk tales. And the only people you could ever lead was that pack of kids you used to bully me with. Who's the boss controlling you? What is it you're trying to accomplish?"

Who cares about you? I'm just doing what my boss tells me to! Although it's all the more fun when you happen to be

involved! That's what he'd said during our big fight. Who was his boss?

"That would be me."

I turned around, and the east door was open, and in it stood a man who should be dead.

Diavolo.

"Auugh!" "Shit!" "What the fuck are you doing, Giorno!?" shouted Fugo, Mista, and Abbacchio, and each in turn attacked him, but all attacks came up empty.

I could hardly believe this guy shared the same body as the fit but delicate Giorno Giovanna, but like R. L. Stevenson wrote in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, personality could change one's appearance and physique. And behind this man's broad back stood a Stand with a tiny face on it's forehead. King Crimson. Of course the gangster's attacks all missed. He was predicting the future, and deleting it.

Giovanna, as Diavolo, pretty much walked straight from the east door over to me. This must not be a job he wanted to do. That's why he'd reverted to Diavolo.

But I wasn't about to just take it! "Arrggghhhh!" I let go of Antonio Torres, and made a fist. "Right then, Diavolo!" I gave him my best punch. Of course I didn't come anywhere near him but it didn't even feel like he'd needed to delete time which made me very sad.

Vvm! I felt a horrible blow, and looked down to find King Crimson's arm sticking through my chest. Quite a lot of blood was spilling down on the now-carpetless floor of the Cube House. I was about to pass out.

"I avoided the heart, so you won't die yet. You'll need to come with me, Jorge Joestar! For an audience with the Secret

Emperor!"

Fuck no, asshole! Is what I wanted to say, but all that came out of my mouth was a horrible whistling sound. He threw my body over his shoulder, hole and all, and began walking away. "Don't let him go!" "Stop!" "Look at me, asshole!" "The fuck do you think you're going?" The Japanese contingent joined the gangsters, trying to get after Diavolo, but King Crimson took care of them easily. A number got punched pretty hard.

"Jorge! No, don't take him!" Reimi shouted through her tears, and my body suddenly felt weightless. Diavolo had jumped through the door in the floor of the study.

King Crimson punched through the door below that, and we went down. Grand Blue had left the next door open, so we went right through. We hit the study again and everyone took a swing but King Crimson went nuts, and every blow was blocked or dodged and whhpp whhpp whhpp whhpp we were still falling and going faster and faster until I couldn't even tell what was happening.

"Jorge! Hang in there!" Reimi yelled. "I'll come find you! Just don't die!"

Uh, that last part seemed like a tall order.

But when my eyes opened I could heard the sound of water lapping.

The sea at night, dead bodies all around me. I was on the deck of a ship at sea, near the open lid of a black, wet box.

Diavolo was standing at the base of it, looking inside. And smiling. "Heh heh heh..just as my dreams said. Wake up! Aren't you tired after your hundred year nap?"

I'd never actually seen the box Diavolo was yelling at, but I recognized it. I'd imagined it, feared it, and it was as ominous as my mind had predicted. No wonder people had thought it was a coffin.

The man who rose slowly out of the box was thin, just skin and bone, but he wore a crown of thorns on his head. There was a hole in the hand he placed on the box's edge. He stood up, stepped out of the box onto the deck. There were holes in his bare feet, too. Stigmata.

It was like Jesus Christ had come back to life at last. But this man was not the son of the Christian God.

This vampire was my father's enemy, my mother's enemy, my grandfather's enemy, and the enemy of every living thing.

It was Dio Brando.

For a while, Dio stood on the deck, gazing at the moonlit sea. His cheeks were sunken and his skin a wreck but his profile was possessed of an unearthly beauty.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Diavolo said. "We can't be here all that long. Let's go, vampire motherfucker."

Without moving his gaze, Dio said, "I went one hundred years without a single dream."

"Hunh?"

"I'm tired, Diavolo."

"I don't care. Just get a move on, you doddering old man."

"And I'm hungry. Since long before I slept."

"Hunh? So...?"

"So first, I eat. You may not look it, but you are my son. Your blood will agree with me," Dio reached his scrawny hand out towards Diavolo.

"! What the fuck, asshole?" Diavolo said, and King Crimson popped out, but Dio's fingers were already in Diavolo's neck. "Ah!"

"Your Stand can't see what happens while time is stopped."

There was a gulping sound from his fingers; he was clearly drinking Diavolo's blood through them. Behind Dio stood a Stand, humanoid, with what looked like air tanks on its back.

What the? I thought. This was the Stand that had tormented

my mother. It could stop time? How the hell could anyone fight that? I was still dying here, so perhaps it didn't matter. There wasn't anything I could do.

Dio let Diavolo fall to the floor, kneeling by his side.. "And when it comes to my blood, I can make prophecies of my own." The crown of thorns on his head began moving on its own.

? Was that a Stand, too?

But Buccellati had said there was a rule, only one Stand per person....then I saw it. As life returned to Dio's body, I saw a star shaped birthmark on his left shoulder. The mark of the Joestars. A mark an adopted son like Dio Brando should never have.

He'd stolen that from my father. Stolen everything from the head down. And either the crown of thorns or the air tank guy was my father's Stand.

"Heh heh...I thought so. Your blood agrees with me." Dio grinned. As color came back to him, he grew younger. Bathed in moonlight, he was almost glowing. "But it's not enough. You were originally such a tiny man...so weak. Don't die!" he roared, yanking his fingers out, and kicking Diavolo in the head.

"Nng!"

"You still have work to do! Keep your wits about you. Or would you rather I made you into a filthy zombie?"

At this, Diavolo reached out a trembling arm, as desiccated as Dio's had been before, and touched Dio's feet.

"Take me there. And don't try anything funny. Bad children get punished by Daddy."

He turned to me. "That goes for you, too. You even think of moving Daddy will make you fetch a switch. Ha ha ha ha! Come on, you fool!" And with that Dio stomped on Diavolo's head again, and there was a sound of bone cracking, and a groan, and Diavolo and Dio vanished.

They'd traveled through time. Just as Diavolo and I had left the Cube House and come to this ship.

646 The Cube House's tesseract construction worked precisely

because it was a house, allowing for an infinite tunnel through the center. Anyone who fell through – by what logic I did not know – would wind up able to time travel, like Tsukumojuku had.

Tsukumojuku had come here from Nishi Akatsuki to work as a detective, and figured out that Cube House was built to have a time travel device within. He'd led me places twice, and then been murdered by Antonio Torres, who'd been traveling with him. Said Antonio Torres had come to Nishi Akatsuki on his boss's orders. Which had been relayed to him by the Japanese-Italian gangster, Giorno Giovanna; but the main orders had all come from this true boss. If he ordered every appearance of eleven-year-old Antonio Torres, then he'd been on La Palma in 1900, Wastewood in 1904, and all over England, France and Germany in the war that started in 1914. The only boss that could do that was a vampire that could time travel. Dio Brando.

This was all that vampire's doing. He had not been sleeping quietly at the bottom of that ocean. He'd woken up, immediately broken through the space time barrier to attack us, and my family had now been tormented for more than thirty years by this dastardly adopted son. Even then, he was acting much too quickly, I thought. Like everything had been prepared, his actions scheduled, and he'd just been waiting for the right timing to start. Or...had he?

That crown of thorns Stand.

And when it comes to my blood, I can make prophecies of my own.

Was that line just explaining the Stand's power literally? In that case, he may have predicted a lot about me. Maybe he'd known everything. I could only hope that wasn't true, but if he knew my entire life's story, perhaps even up to the moment of my death, right here. That would explain why he'd been unimpressed by our arrival; it was all part of his plan, and he was simply annoyed by anything that slowed him down.

You may not look it, but you are my son. Your blood will agree with me.

What did that mean? Was it possible he had a child born and raised in Italy? Giovanna? Who's life and fate he knew as well as my own?

How much of the future did Dio know?

I went one hundred years without a single dream.

Had he spent the entire time peering into the future with his crown of thorns? At the bottom of the sea? For a hundred years? I passed out. And I dreamed.

Of Lisa Lisa.

"...wake up," Dio said, stomping on my face. I opened my eyes to find it was almost dawn. The sky was beginning to lighten. Diavolo was lying on the deck next to me, painfully thin, on the brink of death. And one other; a half naked man with long hair and horns on his forehead. This man's eyes were open but he did not appear to be alive. But from the color and pallor of his skin he didn't look dead, either. He had bite marks on his throat. Was he a zombie? But he was an unusually gorgeous man, and I found it hard to believe he could be a zombie. Plus those horns. I'd never seen a vampire or a zombie with horns. Who was he? What was he?

648 "...we have no time. We must hurry. Before I'm no longer a vampire..." Dio was acting very odd. His step was unsteady, he was covered in sweat, and his gaze unfocused. Like he was sick. And he held a large Eastern sword in his trembling hands. Dio caught me looking, and as exhausted as he looked, he still managed a grin. "Heh...this is a Japanese katana, Jorge. Beautiful, isn't it? Supple and strong, the sharpest blade in the world. See?" And with that he held the sword aloft, the blade turned towards him, and with a sharp breath schunk! He brought it down upon his own head. The sword split Dio all the way to his chest in one blow. "Nnnnnnnnn~! As they said...! No...resistance! One swing, and it cuts this far! Heh

heh heh!" The two halves of his face was still grinning down at me. "This...is something your father, Jonathan, taught me. My life...is so strong I can be cut in half and not die. Heh heh heh. Observe! Your father's sword only cut me to my guts, but...unhhhhhhh!" With a mighty grunt, Dio pushed the Japanese sword still further, straight down through his crotch until he'd cut his entire body in half. "See? I live! Even cut in two!"

I was pretty flabbergasted, but I wasn't really sure if it was showing on my face. Dio didn't seem to care if I reacted one way or the other. That was fine, I thought. You're a damn fool, Dio. I dunno what the shit you're up to but while you're showing off, the sun is rising behind you!

"And...farewell, Jorge Joestar. A man with no Hamon, no Stand, and nothing else to write home about."

Dio raised the bloody sword, and I could do nothing to stop him. He was right. I couldn't use Hamon. I didn't have a Stand.

But I did have Beyond! As I remembered that fact, I realized Diavolo had turned back into Giorno Giovanna, and had his Stand out. Gold Experience Requiem. The Stand that turned everything to nothing.

Go for it!

"Like I said...I know what my blood...will do."

Dio's Stand was out; cut in half but still moving, its hand around Gold Experience Requiem's throat.

"I don't care...if I kill you, Giorno. Do you want...to die right now?"

Lying on the deck, red marks on his throat like he was being strangled by an invisible hand, Giovanna said, "I don't mind. But I do have one favor to ask."

".....? What...?"

"Make me the one who gets your soul. Make me your...Dio Brando's double."

"No. It won't work with you. The train robber's son doesn't have the star mark."

Train robber? What?

"But I have it!" Giovanna said. "I am your true son, father."

"What...?" Dio pointed his sword at Giovanna, and cut his clothes at the left shoulder, checking. He did indeed have the star mark. "Are you...?"

"I canceled my own death, survived in a place between life and death until I arrived here. I followed you here, to this far off universe, and waited. So I could be useful to you, father. So I could become you."

As Giovanna spoke, the crown of thorns appeared on Dio's brow again. He was looking at the future.

"Hmm...I didn't pay much attention to you after you took Diavolo down. But it seems that is your fate."

"It is the power of my will, father," Giovanna said, tearing up. Without hesitation, Dio thrust the sword into his heart. "Ngh!"

As Giovanna died, Dio said, "No time for idle chatter."

Giovanna reached his arm out towards Dio...then it fell to the deck. In Dio's Stand's hands, Gold Experience Requiem faded, and vanished.

Something hot and furious rose up inside me, and I longed to fly into a violent rage, but I couldn't move so much as a finger. I wanted to scream, but couldn't make a noise, wanted to howl but all I could manage was some pathetic snivels.

Dio looked annoyed. "That's no way to cry!" he said. "Are you not Jonathan's son? Your father...cried rather a lot, but never in quite that pathetic a manner."

I couldn't keep my emotions in check. I kept crying, unable to stop the tears.

"You heard him. This is what he wanted," Dio said, tossing his sword aside. Then he plunged his hand deep into his own left

chest. Zumm!

"Mmmmmm! Heh...heh heh heh..." he laughed. "I have come to know the shape of life, to understand it. I can remove it!" He pulled his arm out of his chest, carrying with it a translucent half-Dio. He was holding half his own soul in his hand. "Heh heh heh heh heh! Thus I divide my own life!" The way he spoke, as if convincing himself, was how I behaved when trying to use Beyond.

Forcing myself to believe, because in belief lies power.

And in that instant the sun showed itself above the horizon, and we were bathed in the sunlight I'd been waiting for.

With a whoosh, Dio's body burned, and I thanked Beyond. Yes! The sun rose in time!

But then Dio yelled, "Arghhhh! This is bad! The sunlight doesn't hurt that much!"

It doesn't?

"I must hurry! Rrraghhh!" he yelled, and took the left half of his soul soundlessly from the left half of his body, and shoved it into Giovanna's dead body. Abruptly, Giovanna's flesh bulked up, his very bones growing, his limbs stretching, his features growing sharper, until he was another Dio.

Dio's personality inhabiting Giovanna's flesh had physically transformed it. Just as Diavolo had changed him.

"Unhhh...shit...was I in time...?" Dio said, and staggered sideways till the two halves of his body were pressed together. The instant the two halves lined up, the cut vanished, and the two halves were one whole again. In the sunlight, his entire body was on fire, but the fury with which that fire burned was waning. This man had conquered the sun.

Smoke rising off him, Dio picked up the sword from the deck, and sliced Giovanna's far too tight clothes off the other Dio. The other Dio fell to the floor, half-naked. The original Dio looked down at him, the crown of thorns appearing again. "Hmm, looks

like I made it in time." Dio picked up 'Dio', threw him in the open coffin, and closed the lid.

Then he sat down on the lid, and let out a long sigh. As he did, his body stopped smoking, and all trace of any burns vanished. He'd been breathing heavily, but now that, too, returned to normal.

He let out one more long sigh, and looked up with a grin on his face. "I feel amazing! Ha ha ha! Such power! This is the world of the Ultimate Thing!? It's astounding! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Ultimate...Thing?

Dio stood up and walked over to the man with the horns, lying on the desk beside me. He bent down beside him, and with a pleasant smile, bit him. He began drinking the man, chewing as he went, the speed with which he ate growing until he was straight up devouring the man. "Wa ha ha ha ha! I can eat him! I can eat the ultimate being and make his flesh my own! Blood! I just have to make the blood agree with me! Ha ha ha! Blood is everything! Becoming a vampire was the best decision I ever made! He's delicious! Cars is the best meal I've ever had! Ha ha ha ha! Hahh ha ha ha ha ! I've never felt better! WRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

He let out a shrill scream. He'd eaten Cars' face and brain and chest and belly and a third of his limbs and it was so disgusting I passed out again.

Maybe I was better off dead.

But I woke up to him kicking my face again. Dio had blood all over his face. "Wake up!" he said. "I could just leave you here and let the vampire 'me' snack on you when he wakes, but you're a Joestar, for better or for worse, and there's no telling what you'll do that I failed to predict. So I can't let you die here. Take me where

I'm going while the Cube House effect is still on you."

I didn't have the energy to do anything, go ahead and toss me aside, don't worry.

"I'll hide and sleep for two years until the fake me that shares my mind and soul is killed. But come for me then so I can collect the Stand again. Then go to the Canary Islands, to England, and in the same place, on the back of Morioh, to 2012's England thirty-six times through the birth and death of the universe. Your wife is waiting for you there."

Lisa Lisa.

Even now that made me want to try a little harder.

I managed to push myself up on my elbow, just high enough to see that there was something Japanese written on the deck in blood. A dying message left by Giorno Giovanna.

Dio couldn't read it, but I knew hiragana well enough.

ゆうき

"Courage", of course. He was telling me to be brave. Giorno Giovanna had sacrificed himself to save me.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Because I didn't have enough courage, he'd had to die!

I couldn't just manufacture narrative flow. If I wanted this Beyond to work for all of us, not just myself, I needed courage. I had to start being more proactive.

Chapter 16

Beyond II

ビヨンド II

Through my eyelids I could tell the blinding light that had enveloped us was dying down. I opened my eyes to see the night sky, with the moon and stars shining down on us.

The giant Antonio Torres hanging from the sky let out a long sigh, and as if that was the signal, Dio spoke.

"I've been waiting for this night for a hundred years," he said. He'd been standing bolt upright on the deck of Das Boot, grinning confidently, as if thirty-six times through the birth and death of the universe was nothing to him. (Next to him, Funny Valentine had closed his eyes, covered them with his hand, and turned his back to avoid the blinding light, much like we had.) "Cars! The wait had been unbearable. Not to eat you, I already know what you taste like. No, I'm just so excited to finally stand at the pinnacle of the world, of the universe, of all history, recorded or otherwise! I am in sight of that goal at last! All that's left is to step up and claim my place! Cars! Bwa ha ha ha! My very soul is quivering, so certain is my victory!"

Cars, too, had paid no mind to the compressed light of 36 universe's history washing over him. He put his hands on his hips, looking down at Dio with a faint smile on his lips. "Hmph. So be it. Come at me, vampire."

Dio moved his arm out in front of him so fast it made an audible whoosh, and wagged his finger tips slightly. "The name of your new emperor is Dio! And as your emperor, you will come to me, Cars!"

Cars betrayed no irritation at Dio's indomitable smile. His own smile grew still larger. He was clearly enjoying this. It was the happiest I'd ever seen him.

I backed away, keeping Penelope behind me. Narancia also quietly stepped behind me. "What the fuck, these guys are nuts!"

he muttered, but I thought him saying that was a sign of his own strength. My knees were knocking and my teeth were chattering and basically everything was shaking and it was super pathetic. My only comfort was the tight grip on my sleeve Penelope had; she was clearly every bit as scared as me. Having a scared girl around was the only thing that kept me from completely losing it.

"Heh heh heh. Seems you've managed to sip a drop or two of my blood somewhere, vampire," Cars chuckled. "What more do you want? You've conquered the sun, will not die or age. What else is there? You know full well your body can never become the true Ultimate Thing, as I have. What's the appeal of being this 'pinnacle' you speak of? I merely wanted to conquer the sun. I personally slaughtered most of my kind in the war, then lost all of my kind that remained, and at last achieved my goal only to find myself alone. You waited a hundred years? I've waited a quadrillion. In all this universe, as far as my abilities reach, only Earth has any life worth mentioning. This is the only place in all the universe where life is worth living. Vampire, you are immortal. There is no need for you to rush into death here."

But Dio just kept beckoning. "A quadrillion years spent not bothering to think can't begin to compare to the hundred years I spent furiously busy."

Still smiling, Cars stared at Dio for a while, then let out a long breath. "Very well. As you have gnawed on my life, you will be a prime opportunity to test the limits of my life force. Perhaps I do need to experiment on just how a body that cannot die may die." He dropped down to the deck.

Dio waited, grinning. "That's what piqued my curiosity, too. Can't die and can't be killed are two different things, after all. Can't have someone pulling an idea I never thought of out of their ass later on, so better to find out the truth right here. But curiosity is a secondary concern; more than anything else I simply want to make

you not exist. Ensuring no clever little bastards think to sip your blood and flesh so that they might stand a chance against me."

Cars strode forward. "Heh heh. I need hardly point out that the clever little bastard is you, vampire."

"My name is Dio Brando. Remember it well."

"I'm not in the habit of naming food."

"Your species has worn the crown long enough. It's time to meet the new boss, Cars."

"Don't project your boundless ego on me. I know perfectly well there are hierarchies between species."

"Ha! There are. Strength and weakness alone provide one."

"Then that very thought will prove your undoing."

"Like I said – I am only here to prove what I already know."

Funny Valentine removed Dio's cape, folded it, and stepped back as Cars reached Dio at last.

"Come on!" Dio yelled. "Mwa ha ha ha ha! Time to dance, Cars! This is the first step!"

"Heh heh. Unable to wait after all."

"Useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless useless!"

Bam! Cars burst into dust like a popped balloon, bits of him flying in all directions.

"Auuugh!" Those of us on the bridge screamed as one. Bits of Cars' blood and flesh hit us so hard we were sent flying. Thank God I'd put Penelope behind me. Minced Cars meat stabbed my face and body, breaking my bones, puncturing my organs, and stripping away my flesh. Nnnnn! I was just a bystander and I was already in critical condition! On the brink of death! "Jorge Joestar! Ahhhhh!" Penelope screamed and Narancia yelled, "Shit! I gotta get Das Boot put away!" And his submarine shrank so rapidly I was

left standing on nothing. But just before the bridge left me behind, Narancia yelled, "Wait, wait!" and grabbed me, pulling me along as he rode a one meter long Das Boot like a skateboard, carrying me like a princess as Penelope clung to my neck as we hurtled through the trees. Ollie, nollie, kickflip, heelflip, totally unnecessary moves but bounding farther away from Dio and then the bits of Cars in me started wriggling and the pain was insane. "Auuuughhhhhhh!" Cars' bones and flesh and blood were crawling out of me and it felt like infinite fishing hooks were yanking my skin in all directions, peeling it off me and then splat! All the bits went flying out of me and blood sprayed everywhere and my vision went woozy. Cars was still alive. Even pulverized, even as a single drop of blood. I could just about see Cars reforming, headed away from us. "Fuck knows what's going on but we gotta get the shit outta here! Ain't nobody got enough lives to survive that crap!" Narancia said, but my hearing was fading out.

"Ahhh! Jorge Joestar! Don't!" Penelope yelled, squeezing my arm. I woke up. I'd only been out for an instant, though, so it wasn't like I was healed up or...wait.

I was unhurt. Cars had healed me as he left my body. It had hurt like hell but I was fine now.

And Penelope worked that out, too. ".....? Jorge Joestar? Hunh? What are you doing?"

"Just enjoying your warm embrace."

"You devil!"

"Who the fuck...?" Narancia said, and someone slapped my head, but the slapper was someone new who said, "Hunh? What?" A girl's voice, one I didn't recognize. "Wait, who is this Jorge?"

I opened my eyes and saw a beautiful girl with long hair, riding a surfboard made of leaves somehow stuck together, riding the length of one tree branch after another alongside Narancia's Das Boot. A Stand Master? A Goddess?

"Elizabeth!" Penelope said. "Thank goodness! You're alive!"

"Oh, um, sorry! I heard your voice and came running but... Who is this guy?"

I produced my card from my chest pocket. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Jorge Joestar, detective."

"....."

Perhaps not a line to use while being carried princess style by an Italian gangster. "Hmm," Elizabeth said, but she took the card anyway. "...this is Japanese?"

"Oh, the back's in English."

"No, I can read Japanese," she said, in Japanese, and not in some heavy foreign accent but with perfect intonation. AMAZING!

"All the boys love Elizabeth," Penelope said, as if it was a foregone conclusion, but she was gorgeous, too!? Maybe not the time to insist upon it.

"If you're fine then get down. This shit's creepy," Narancia said, and he made Das Boot the size of a small fishing boat and put me and Penelope down on it and Elizabeth hopped her surfboard down and as she landed all the leaves scattered, blowing behind us. It was so graceful I kinda gawked at it and said, "That's a really cool Stand," but Elizabeth said, "It's not a Stand. It's Hamon." Um. Hamon? Oh, right, the people that fought vampires and zombies! Penelope had mentioned them when she was telling the story of the other Jorge Joestar's life. Then this must be Jorge Joestar's childhood friend and wife! Right, right. Oh. Hmph.

"The zombies seemed to be gathering in London again so I came to see what they were up to," Elizabeth said. "And here's Dio at last. But he's way more intense than I remember from the box. And that other guy's just as insane, who is he?"

"Um," I said, and hesitated.

In a few decades, Elizabeth would end up fighting Cars, and witness his transformation into Ultimate Cars. Along with her son,

Joseph. Should I really tell her? Would I cause a time paradox and split us off into a parallel world? But only someone from the 21st century would think to think that because Penelope just flat out said, "He's called Cars. I dunno who he is, but he seemed to know Joseph. These people are from the future, and they seem to know a lot about what's going on, so ask them!"

Uh oh, I thought, but Elizabeth just shook her head. "Nope. I've learned you can't do anything about fate."

"Tom Petty's prophecies?"

"....."

"Elizabeth, I haven't given up."

".....?"

"We *will* find Jorge. And we'll bring him back to you."

"But..."

"I just wanted to do something. I've been with Erina all this time, and thought that was being with Jorge, but I was never really with him. You were always off in some distant land, but you were actually with Jorge all the time. And now Jorge is gone, too, but Joseph is here, so all this time I've been thinking I've got to get Elizabeth to come home. But I knew you were sad, and angry, and you can be pretty scary, and I knew you couldn't come back to be with Joseph, so I didn't know what to do. Same reason you kept your distance from Jorge. You didn't want to lose him, so you left and stayed as far from him as you could. You tried to keep that up but finally you couldn't stand it any more and you were together at last but on your wedding day, Jorge...disappeared. When I imagine your grief and remorse I know why you can't be with Joseph. But today I met another Jorge Joestar, this one, the Japanese one. And I changed my mind about that. Really crazy things happen in this world. And if something this crazy can happen, miracles, dreams, hopeless desires...all of those things might come true, too. And maybe this Jorge Joestar's name is a sign, and he'll show us the

way. So with no warning whatsoever I begged Erina to let me go, and came with them. I thought at least we'd manage to find you. If we used 'Jorge Joestar' as bait. Ah ha ha ha. And we found you already! So now I'm extra sure. I *will* find Jorge. The real Jorge Joestar. This other Jorge Joestar will show us the way, be our bait, be our decoy, be a trap we set, whatever it takes to find the real Jorge Joestar, and bring him back to you. I don't know why, but I know I can do that now."

"...Penelope..."

The two beautiful women stared deeply into each other's eyes, and I felt like the Jorge Joestar of this world must have led a truly blessed life.

"Yo, yo, look at that...!" Narancia said. Mildly annoyed by this interruption, I looked where he was pointing, and saw Dio and Cars punching each other. Each time one made contact, Bam! Bam! They'd explode, and then reassemble their pulverized bodies just to punch back. The explosions were getting more violent, and they were putting themselves back together faster each time. It was like dark red fireworks moving through the air flickering and blooming. Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam. Ba-bam. And both were smiling ear to ear.

"Enjoying their immortality," I said, disgusted. I felt sick to me stomach.

"But maybe not just that," Elizabeth said, and I noticed she was looking somewhere else, and turned to find Great Britain had been traveling east all this time and the sky was growing lighter... Wait, this wasn't sunrise, it was sunset...!

We'd been going west, faster than the speed of the Earth's rotation, and had caught up with evening. We must be going at least 460 meters per second. Faster than the speed of sound. So? The cliff we were standing on was at the very front end of Great Britain, and we should be hearing the sound of the island rushing

through the waves, but we were going so fast we left it behind. Was that why it was so eerily quiet?

"I believe Dio has a strategy in mind, and is buying time," Elizabeth said.

I could see land on the Western horizon, and as it grew closer I realized what it was. The United States. I could even make out Manhattan Island. In the orange light of evening, the fourth rhinoceros beetle. There almost certainly was something there.

"Like the sun's rising from the west," Penelope said. Hmm? I thought. The sun rising from the west? It felt like a long time ago but I'd heard that phrase this morning, in the Arrow Cross House. The morning Tsukumojuku was murdered. But that wasn't like this, the sun wasn't actually rising in the west, just when the sun rose the arrow that points west was instead pointing to the rising sun. Which reminded me of another thing I couldn't believe I'd actually forgotten.

'Sun rising from the west' was literally the meaning of my home town's name, Nishi Akatsuki.

A detective who'd come to Nishi Akatsuki had been killed the morning the sun rose in the 'west', and to solve this murder a detective from Nishi Akatsuki was now watching the sun rise in the west. And now I remembered one more thing. Manhattan Island's tip was a corner of this universe's Bermuda Triangle. The triangle that had sent Tsukumojuku to Nishi Akatsuki...!

It felt like something awful was closing in around us. For a while I stared at the western sunrise, letting the feeling nag at me, until three American Air Force fighters scrambled from shore came flying towards us, and brought me back to reality. Didn't seem like they were gonna let us make it as far as the Bermuda Triangle, I thought. Only natural. They were flying towards us at mach speed.

They passed by without any sound reaching us, dropping missiles that exploded soundlessly off the barrier...inside the belly of the giant Antonio Torres.

"Unhhhh!" The suspended upper half of his body appeared again, screaming.

"That's a hell of a bomb...!" Elizabeth said. Penelope went white as a sheet.

"I doubt it can get through," I said. "The barrier covering us is really strong."

There were two or three more waves of bombs, but the fire just rolled out along the barrier surface...the only difference from Morioh was that Antonio Torres made a fuss about it each time. "Raaahhhhhhh!" "Nuhhhhhhhhaaaaa!" "It huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuts!" "Make them stoooooooooooooooooop!" He writhed around upside-down, shrieking, and I glared up at him...and saw something.

"Hunh? Who's that?" There was someone standing near giant Antonio's waist. Not wearing a space suit, so not Pucci...it was wearing a slim-fit coat and gloves. President Funny Valentine! He was walking across the surface of the barrier using his giant frog Stand, ignoring the explosions and fighter planes overhead, making directly for us. Funny had come to Morioh, too, but having seen Funnier's fate with my own eyes, what could he have to say to us? I didn't know what he was after, but I was scared. What was it he'd said in Morioh?

If nothing changes, the American army will flip the island.

Right, that was it. "The island" then was Morioh. Had they flipped Morioh? The American army? How could they do that? Morioh was floating, but it wasn't a dinghy, it was an island! No way you could just flip something that big! Admittedly, the islands moving of their own accord was equally impossible, so perhaps I couldn't say that for certain.

The wind outside the barrier must be really intense, but the

frog crawled along on all fours, and then Funny climbed off its back without any apparent difficulty. He was holding a large piece of paper in his hands. A message. He spread it out on the surface of the barrier, facing us. Narancia grabbed a pair of binoculars off the bridge, set them to maximum magnification, and took a look. "Co... Cora...geh? Coragay?"

That seemed wrong. "Let me have them," I said, and pretty much just snatched them out of his hands, and he got mad about that but fuck it, I could read the sign.

COURAGE

Courage?

"Just one word?" I said. "It is some sort of code?" Had he maybe gone senile, and had just gotten lost and wound up here? Seemed unlikely.

"That's a warning. Directed at all of you."

We turned around, and young Funny Valentine, the one Dio had brought from the past, was standing behind us. As we turned he spread out a cape, and flung it out around me. It was the one Dio had been wearing earlier. "Do not fear what you are about to see," Funny said, and just before the cape covered the two of us Elizabeth hissed, and a brutal fist shot under the cape, slamming into Funny's cheek. "Hunh...argh! auauauauau!" Funny's face went flying up down left and right but the cape came down on us.

When I pushed it off, Das Boot was gone, and Elizabeth and Penelope were nowhere to be seen. We were in the middle of a red desert, nothing but boulders and rocks, on the edge of a long,

straight, unpaved road.

"Aaughh aaughh blargh argh hahh hahh..." Funny's face finally stopped twitching, and he staggered but managed to stay on his feet somehow. "Who...who the hell is that woman!?" he said, gasping for breath. His face was all swollen, his handsome completely ruined. He was unrecognizable. A moment before he'd been slim, fit, and now his body sagged, the rounded figure of a man who indulged too much. Even his body was swollen? But as I watched he recovered, returning to the handsome man I'd seen before.

Hamon.

I didn't know how it worked, but she could gather leaves and make them stick together, and make a single punch inflict damage over time. Moisture was the only thing I could think that leaves and human bodies had in common, and 'Hamon' meant ripple, so perhaps it was a power that sent ripples through the moisture in living things. While she was in contact, the ripples kept going, and after she let go they'd take a while to die down...

So...where were we? The redness was somewhat like the Martian landscapes I'd seen a few hours ago, but it wasn't that. It didn't seem like I was in a dream or an illusion. This place actually existed somewhere. It was real. The smell and the feel of it were real. Not the same sort of real you think you're experiencing in a dream or creation. Like if I kicked a pebble there was too much information. When he caught his breath, Funny said, "I'm sorry. I've kept you waiting. It looks like we're right on time."

I followed his gaze, and a car was coming towards us down the desert road. It left a towering cloud of red dust behind it. It was a classic Bentley, a Drophead Coupe. The driver was wearing sunglasses, and letting his long curls fly in the open seat breeze. I'd seen those curls before...standing right next to me.

It was another Funny Valentine.

"Have we...traveled in time?" I asked.

"Not in time," Funny said. "Across worlds. Just a little step sideways into a parallel world."

"...those actually exist? Or are you creating them with your Stand?"

".....! Hmm...worlds created by my Stand, Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap? The possibility never occurred to me."

But there was definitely a world here that his Stand had brought us to. A parallel world, hunh? "Mr. President, do you know who I am?" I was a detective, if not a particularly famous one, but even so it was possible people overseas had heard of me. But I was a detective in modern times, in 2012. This Funny was President of the United States of America in 1920.

"Lately, yes," Funny said, as the Bentley the other Funny was driving pulled up.

"Hi, Jorge Joestar," the other Funny said.

"...? You know me, too?"

"Hop in," 'Funny' said, ignoring the question.

Yeah, but it was a two-seater. I was super not up for being in a Funny Valentine sandwich, but then the 'Funny' driving said, "Enjoy," opened the door, and got out.

Hunh? In the middle of nowhere? "Is another car coming?" I asked. 'Funny' stared off in the distance, so I turned to look. Three cars were tearing across the desert in the distance. Kicking up so much dust I couldn't actually make out the cars themselves.

"They're in a big hurry," I said.

"It's a race," 'Funny' said. "The Steel Ball Run. This is the second stage. The event's only just begun but already it's packed with thrills. Success is a foregone conclusion...at least, as far as the event itself goes."

The Steel Ball Run? "I read about that in history. This is it, hunh? But what is the President doing here? Isn't this more of a

local shindig?"

"The Steel Ball Run has never once been a 'local shindig'," 'Funny' said. He reached into his chest pocket, and pulled out a book. "Part of the holy scriptures. Nine volumes in all. I've ordered my men and their associates to collect and recover these."

"Hunh...? If this is Steel Ball Run, this is America, right? And the second stage was Monument Valley. If you're using the Steel Ball Run to gather those books...I mean, you're the President. Can't you just have people look for them normally?"

"It requires foreshadowing and flow."

Foreshadowing and flow? Oh, I knew that feeling. You don't get things to shape up right, you can't get the result you want.

"What's in the book?" I asked, but before I could look closer he slipped the 'holy scripture' back in his pocket. It was a very old book, and it looked ready to crumble or fall apart if it was handled at all roughly, so I didn't press the point. "...so, uh," I said. "In my adopted family, one of our ancestors was in the Steel Ball Run. It was a horse race across the entire country then, but you're using cars this time?"

"It changes," 'Funny' said. "Sometimes it's horses, other times cars. It's even been planes and blimps. In your world and in this parallel world."

Mm? "In my world it was horses."

"That is not a 'world'; merely a universe between an end and a beginning. When I say 'world' I mean the entire series of universes. What lies there is not just space, but a history that repeats with minor variations."

"....."

"Once a universe passes, in the next universe history begins anew – similar, but distinct. The history of a 'world' is a spiral staircase of different universes."

Spiral Staircase.

One of the fourteen words...! Come to think of it, Funny and Pucci had exchanged a few words I hadn't understood.

"I am me but at the same time I am not. How can this be true? I believe you know the answer, Father Pucci."

"Yes, I do."

"Please share!"

"Because I can make a connection. Because I can't make the connection."

".....!"

"Because what I create is the Spiral Staircase."

"Very good!"

At the time, it had been complete nonsense, but thinking it over now, perhaps it meant as follows.

By **I am me but at the same time I am not**, he meant that history repeated itself, but with variations. As the universe looped, Funny would be born again as Funny, and live a similar life, but not the same one. Or perhaps their identities weren't the same in the first place.

Because I can make a connection. Because I can't make the connection. Because what I create is the Spiral Staircase meant Pucci's Stand that could speed up time had been used by one Pucci or another to reach the next universe, attempting to connect history and create a 'loop'. And he didn't believe it was a failure on his part that instead of a true loop, he'd made a spiral staircase. When I said this, 'Funny' nodded. "I have no idea if this is Pucci's fault, or if it was always destined to turn out this way. But Dio considers this Pucci's sin, and has punished him accordingly."

Pucci was gone.

"Punished how?"

"I don't know. But I know for sure he won't return."

"Mr. President, as the American President, why are you working with this Dio? As more or less his henchman? And who is this Dio, anyway? All I really know is the Dio from 36 universes ago wasn't just a thug who robbed a train. He seems to be fighting Cars more or less evenly, so...what is he? Is he not human?"

"He's a vampire who drank the blood of the ultimate being. But that's not what makes him really terrifying."

".....?"

"In the Steel Ball Run in your universe," 'Funny' suddenly changed the subject. "I believe they gathered nine Holy Grails, was it? And Johnny Joestar played a major role, although he was forced to drop out along the way."

"? Is that right? I don't really know much about him. Um, can we get to the point?"

"....."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"There's one thing even Dio doesn't know," 'Funny' said, suddenly completely serious. Here we go.

".....what?"

"Earlier, when Pucci was explaining the meanings of the fourteen words, did he say something about the word 'singularity' appearing twice?"

"It was pretty vague, but something about time and the connections between people?"

"Yes. But that is very vague, isn't it? You see, that was only a flow that 'I' created for Pucci, that allowed him to believe what he wished to believe."

"...but he ended up with that nutso Stand?"

"Producing that was our goal. It was all calculated. By Dio Brando."

"...but there's something about the 'Singularity' bits he hasn't completely done the math on?"

"Exactly. You aren't a detective for nothing, I see."

"?"

"Listen, and remember this. 'Singularity' appears twice. If you compare the universe repeating in the real world to the similar but distinct parallel worlds, there are things that only exist one time. There is no other instance of these, not even anything similar to them. The first is the body of the holy man, the pieces of which were being hunted behind the scenes of the very first Steel Ball Run in the real world."

"The holy man...!?"

"Yes. And the second singularity is you, Jorge Joestar."

"An abandoned Japanese kid adopted by the Joestar family who becomes a detective. You are born only once in this world, and there is no replacement for you in any other universe, or in any parallel world."

Hunh, I thought. But I figured that response wouldn't quite cut it so I stayed quiet and tried to think.

First, we couldn't prove that.

Funny had called out this other 'Funny' to provide evidence that parallel worlds existed and worked as he said – that they were similar but different. But in fact this was just...well, maybe that was a weird way to put it, but it could be time travel or teleportation of some kind, and the other 'Funny' could just be Funny's twin and actually had a different name and was trying to trick me for some reason. All of this was information overload and I hadn't verified any of it myself. If I chose to doubt it there were any number of

ways to doubt it, and the worlds this 'Funny' could access with his Stand, Dirty Whatever, were too many and too large. Had he really been able to search them properly? Parallel worlds were...I mean, my source was realistic sci-fi novels, but anyway, the theory was that any minute difference would create a parallel world. Having one hair more or less would do it; the timing of a drop of water from a leaky faucet being one second early or later would do it. I had no idea how the parallel worlds Dirty Whatever visited were created, but without the ability to investigate them myself, it came down to me deciding to take 'Funny' at his word, and I was professionally incapable of taking anybody at their word.

And secondly, so what? What did they want from me? "So I can't actually do anything though?" I said, which I guess wasn't much better than "Hunh" as far as responses went. But 'Funny' just laughed.

"We aren't expecting any specific action on your part. We just want you to believe what I said."

"That part's kinda hard. I'm doubtful by occupation."

"...heh heh. Feel free to doubt as you like. You thought a while before answering, right? Do as you always do, and don't let those wheels stop spinning. I don't want you to have faith in me. I want you to have faith in yourself. I want you to believe that there is no one who can take your place."

? That seemed a little different than believing in myself. It sounded more like the certainty that I could do this that happened when I was using Beyond.

When I failed to say anything, 'Funny' kept talking. "Listen, Jorge Joestar. I don't need an answer from you. I just want you to believe. ...it's almost time. You should get in the car and leave this place." He opened the passenger side door, I got in, and he shut it after me. Then he handed his sunglasses to the original Funny in the driver's seat. As he took them, Funny said, "Thanks. I'd have

preferred to handle this alone, but..."

"I understand, of course."

In the blink of an eye, a humanoid Stand with rabbit-like ears moved from Funny to the other 'Funny'.

"All yours."

"I got this."

Then Funny put the sunglasses on, and drove the Bentley away, leaving the other 'Funny' behind. So what was 'Funny' going to do in the middle of the desert? Wait, was I fucked now? Dirty Whatever had brought us to this parallel world, but if he'd handed it over, what now? Were we stuck in this world now? Was Funny not planning on taking me back to my world?

"Uh, what about your Stand?"

"It'll come back eventually."

"?"

The rule was one Stand per person. The 'Funny' from this parallel world might not have Dirty Whatever, but what he going to use that Stand to do? I looked at 'Funny' in the mirror, and saw a massive cloud rising up behind him. I turned around to get a better view. There was yellow and green in the cloud, and it was truly a dreadful sight. I was fully awake, but the feeling was the same as that moment where you realize you're having a nightmare.

'Funny' made sure we were safely away, and then turned to face the cloud.

"What is that cloud...?" I asked.

"The Cars from this parallel world," Funny answered. "The other me is going up against him one more time."

"What for?"

"To conquer Cars."

".....!" So that terrifying man was somewhere inside that massive rolling cloud?

And the Cars from this world appeared to be very angry.

"We told him this was but a parallel world, and he and everything in it weren't real," Funny said. "I've fought that living nightmare any number of times in different parallel worlds. Looking for a way to seal him or send him away. Allowing something as fearsome as that man to live free is always a threat," said the President of the 'free' country. Behind us came a loud crack crack boom of lightning striking and I looked back to see Cars standing there, his hair in a single braid, his arm through the chest of this world's 'Funny'. His eyes met mine.

"I've never once defeated him," Funny said. "But I've done my best to learn from him. And I'll put that to use and beat him in the battle to come."

Cars tossed 'Funny' aside, and Dirty Whatever floated away, swooping back towards us. Returning to its original owner. But Cars was flying after it...!

"So you're the one who made this world? I did not give you permission, and I will not allow it!" he yelled, clouds billowing up behind him. He was so terrifying I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Next to me, Dirty Whatever disappeared back inside Funny, and he shouted, "Let's go, Jorge Joestar! As a singularity, you have a duty to witness everything!"

"I do not!" I yelled back, and then couldn't stop myself from screaming in horror as Cars got closer. "Aughhhh!"

Funny had the Bentley going at top speed, and he yanked the steering wheel so hard the car couldn't handle the curve and began to roll. As the world went upside-down and I was too scared to even scream Funny said, "I'll say this once more, so remember it well! You are the only one like you in all the world, Jorge Joestar!"

Was that anything to scream while deliberately trying to kill us both in a car you crashed!? The upside-down Bentley's driver's side touched down first, and I saw half Funny's head get torn off, and before I could even think 'ugh' my face slammed into a nearby

rock.

But I was still alive. "Aughhh!" I opened my eyes screaming and found myself lying on stone pavement, unharmed, in a square of some kind and the first thing I saw was a water fountain with a winged angel statue. Eros, the famous tourist attraction, so this was London, the West End, Piccadilly Circus. Even since the place had been built in 1819, it had been packed with people, but there were no people here now. Because it was occupied by zombies. Around the fountain and on the stairs and benches and roofs and street and abandoned horse carriages were the remains of zombie corpses and piles of dust. The light of the evening sun had hit, and they'd all died. Well, not all; I could hear groans and screeches coming from the insides of nearby buildings. The entrance to the subway was like a full on zombie choir. My heart still pounding, I looked west, and the sun was shining between the buildings of London. I couldn't be sure where Great Britain was headed next, but if it stopped, the sun would soon set again, and the zombies that had survived in the shadows of the buildings would come flooding out onto the streets again. Seeing me staring at the dark entrance to Piccadilly Station, Funny said, "Joestar, no need to pay them any heed." He wasn't dead either. He still had all his head!

"Look!" he pointed at the sky, and I turned to see a giant Antonio Torres torso growing out of the sky, clutching his throat in pain.

"Unhhhhhhh blarghhhhhh!" His giant mouth split open and he puked out a military helicopter. It was off balance at first, but soon recovered and flew down above London, headed right for this square.

"His honor, the President of the United States," Funny said. "The Funniest Valentine, another 'me' and another 'grandson'."

There was a circular emblem with a bald eagle on the side of the massive chopper; the Grand Seal of the United States.

"And here come our two stars," Funny said. I followed his gaze, and saw two figures flying towards us, buildings in the West End exploding in their wake. Obviously, this was Dio and Cars, but following them were three giant Das Boot submarines flying close together. They were sailing across the treetops, heedlessly smashing any buildings in their way, and firing a constant barrage of missiles. Boom boom boom boom! Exploding all around Dio, who wasn't making any particular effort to avoid or dodge them. Several missiles scored direct hits, and his body was momentarily blown apart, but it reassembled instantly, and Dio remained alive. Occasionally a missile would miss Dio and hit Cars, blowing him up, but he was back a moment later, too. This was hopeless, I thought. They'd never have a winner. Neither one could ever die, no matter how much damage they did to each other. And both of them had figured that out a long time ago, and I could hear their laughter on the wind. Bwa ha ha mwah ha ha. They seemed to be having the time of their lives, trashing the shit out of the city.

And then from the back of the rubble came a wave of sand that swept over the buildings and swallowed Dio. Cars appeared to have added Goyathlay Soundman's sand Bound to his repertory. Pulling Dio with it, the rubble sea came flooding towards us, turned into a whirlpool near the square that rose up into a giant pillar of rubble. More and more rubble was pulled into it and the size of it expanded, and the density grew thicker and when at last it stopped swirling it was over 300 meters tall, and 200 meters across, made of almost solid rock like a giant mortar built right next to Piccadilly Circus.

Without so much as a glance in our direction, Cars daintily landed at the tip of the Eros fountain, and laughed at Dio.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! How's that? The strength of that is

dozens of times these puny buildings!"

But we could hear a faint sound growing from inside the pillar.

Thud. Thud. Thud thud. Thud thud thud. Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud!

"Useless useless!"

Thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud thud! Boom!

A hole erupted in the side of the pillar, and Dio leapt out, half-naked, and we just gaped at him and Cars kept laughing. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Well done! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Dio brushed the dust off his shoulders, laughing. "Whether we fight physically or with Stands, nothing either of us does seems capable of overcoming our immortality."

"Yet," Cars said. "But I am still learning about Stands. I may not be able to kill you, but I may be able to send you away. The same way I myself was once defeated!"

Dio sighed. "But I'm unable to acquire further Stands, so I must have others fight for me. Cars, I won't give you time to learn more about Stands! You're the one who will be sent away! Into another dimension, ensuring you will never again return to this world!"

Then he raised a hand to the hovering helicopter, wagged the tips of his fingers ever so slightly, and the door of the chopper opened, and I saw the current President of the United States in person for the first time. The Funniest Valentine had his curls cut short, but was otherwise identical to Funny.

Another 'me' and another 'grandson'.

By my side, Funny let out a long breath.

"Come on down, my minion, The Funniest!" Dio said, and swung his arm down hard. The Funniest leapt out of the helicopter with no parachute. The other passengers looked alarmed, but The Funniest himself was completely calm. "And your time to shine, Funny!" At Dio's cue, Funny broke into a run, headed for the place where The Funniest was about to land. Right next to the Piccadilly Circus fountain, Funny stopped, braced himself, and spread out his arms as The Funniest fell into them, and Funny didn't catch him, but clapped his hands together. And with that, The Funniest was gone.

Ah ha. Getting hit in the head didn't send you to a parallel world, getting trapped between things did.

Funny spread his hands again, and turned towards Cars. "Dojaaaaaaaan!" he said, grinning.

".....? A magic trick?" Cars said, still not clear on how Funny's Stand worked.

"What do you think?" Funny asked.

Cars scratched his chin. "Hm. Doesn't matter either way. You get near me, you die."

"I'll do just that. But you'll never see me coming."

".....?"

"Here I come!" Funny yelled, and broke into a run. Cars was ready for him, but unlike Dio, Funny was running on real human legs and didn't seem particularly fast, but just as Cars confidently spread his hands to grab him it was like some frames dropped from the film I was watching. Not fast forward, like a moment of time skipped.

Funny was in mid-jump one moment, and the next he'd already clapped his hands together.

With a huge smile, Funny said, "Dojaa..." and trailed off. He

must have thought Dirty Whatever had sent Cars to that parallel world, but Cars was still standing right where he was.

He'd bent the upper half of his body like a crochet hook to avoid Funny's clap.

"Whaaat...!?" Dio said, which made it clear that momentary time skip that had assisted Funny's attack was his doing. Beside Funny stood a humanoid Stand with what looked like air tanks on its back.

Cars looked at this and also said, "What!?" I guess he was surprised because Dio had not shown his Stand the whole time they were fighting. He'd kept it in reserve for this exact moment. And even though his Stand attack had been timed perfectly, Cars' reflexes had been far greater than Dio or Funny had ever imagined.

"...tch, don't just stand there, Funny! One more time!" Dio yelled, and time began to skip all over the place.

Clap clap clap clap clap clap Funny never even hit the ground, just came after Cars with everything he had but every time his hands came together Cars' contorted his body further out of the way, slipping through Funny's grasp.

"God damn!" Funny said, impressed despite himself with the speed of Cars' reaction.

I'd figured out what Dio's Stand power was. It could stop the flow of time. Dio's Stand was right next to Funny, so it must be moving Funny while time was stopped, setting things up so all he had to do was bring his hands together. But in the instant that time started moving again, Cars was able to dodge.

"Heh heh heh." Warping his body to dodge another clap, Cars glanced over at Dio and grinned. "I figured out your Stand," he said.

As Funny went to clap again, Dio grinned, too. "A moment too late," he said.

Cl-clap!

Two claps in rapid succession...and Cars was gone.

I looked at Funny's hands. As if to make sure he'd gotten rid of Cars, Funny had his palms open...and there was another set of hands reaching out of them. Wearing similar gloves. Funny had sent The Funniest to a parallel world, and The Funniest had then reached back into this one. Which meant, Funny and The Funniest had the same power.

Another 'me' and another 'grandson'.

"It was all part of the plan to create a rhythm, and let him get comfortable," Dio chuckled.

The rule was one Stand per person, but perhaps as the universe changed over, the same Stands would crop up again. These two would not normally have ever met, but Dio had brought them together. As my head wrestled with the scale of this plan, I noticed a thin black thread wrapped around my neck. ".....?"

Funny noticed it, too. That thread extended from my neck to The Funniest's hands in his.

Dio saw this and yelled, "Funny! Cut that hair!"

Hair? Right, the thing around my neck wasn't thread, but black hair.

A strand of Cars' hair. Coming from The Funniest inside of Funny.

Yank! I was jerked into the air, towards Funny, and my eyes met Dio's. "What the fuck...!?" he said.

"I don't know!" Funny said, but I knew Funny was up to something and I vanished into the palm's of The Funniest's hands.

We were in a rain-drenched park. Beyond the wet trees and mist I could just make out some skyscrapers, and across the square I could see the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was in New York, Manhattan Island, Central Park. In the parallel world The Funniest

had dragged me to.

Where was Cars? I followed the hair wrapped around my neck but instead found another 'Funny', his hands together. Hunh? I thought. Why was Funny here before me?

I could tell the hair around my neck was coming from this Funny's hands. This was the real Funny.

For example, Dio could have guessed they couldn't catch Cars even with the time stop and had the real Funny wait here ahead of time to send Cars to yet another parallel world as soon as The Funniest caught him off guard and sent him here. Two layers away from the real world. The rabbit-eared Stand was standing behind the real Funny here. Then, logically, the Funny that had been with me in Picadilly Circus was fake, but he'd been using Dirty Whatever so...one Stand per person so there was no way that was fake. But when he'd taken me to Monument Valley in that other world Funny had shared his Stand with the other Funny. If Funny was here, then they'd planned this before The Funniest jumped out of the helicopter, and the real one was already inside The Funniest. And the fake Funny had done his magic trick and The Funniest had vanished. In that instant The Funniest had handed Dirty Whatever over to the fake Funny. Funny's hands were still clasped together, and he was not at all surprised to see me. "Is this why you took me to Monument Valley?" I asked. "A sort of fool your friends to fool your enemies deal?"

They were already planning on bringing me here?

"That, too," Funny said. "But we also wanted to verify that you are indeed a Singularity. Do you know why Cars brought you here, and is trying to take you further in?"

".....?"

"Precisely because you're a Singularity. There is not other you in any other world. Cars has sniffed that out somehow. I'm sure of it. I'd like you to remember that fact. Although I believe you

were told as much by other mes in Monument Valley and Piccadilly Circus."

"And what meaning are you prescribing to me being this Singularity?"

"Obviously, I mean that you have a role that is yours alone. The only meaning you could have is in your role. You do not exist in any parallel world. Which means the real you can never be killed by any alternative yous. In other words, your path in life is a single possibility. Your true purpose. You must fulfill it. That said...even without knowing a thing about parallel worlds, the nature of the world is that we all fulfill our roles."

"....."

"You are a detective. That doesn't change. Nothing is added to that fact. But if you know that that role is yours and only yours, perhaps you will be less hesitant to perform that role."

"Are you looking at the future, too? How can you speak in prophecies like this?"

"We aren't the ones that see the future. Dio is," Funny said. He put his finger to his temple, and traced a line around his skull. Dio's crown of thorns.

"That? It isn't just decorative?" I'd assumed it was just a device to help him manipulate Pucci.

"No. That's Dio's Stand, The Passion. We don't know the full extent of its power, but he can use that to read the future in great detail."

"? But Dio has another Stand? The one with the air tanks that can stop time."

"Yes. That is The World. You have a keen eye. Indeed, that is a terrifying Stand. When he was a vampire he could only stop time for nine seconds, but with the power of the ultimate being that has expanded considerably, and he can now stop time for nearly an hour."

"Jesus," I said. "How can you fight a Stand like that?"

Funny shook his head. "It is a terrifying Stand, but there are ways to fight it. What really makes Dio Brando formidable, to my mind, is The Passion."

The true nature of fear.

The Passion, hunh? I thought. Passione in Italian. Was there some link to the Passione Family Shiobana Haruno had been part of?

"Anyway, I'm not interested, and don't have a Stand, so I'd quite like it if you could take me somewhere neither Dio nor Cars are," I said. I really wanted to go home to Fukui.

"I'm afraid you must go," Funny said.

"Hunh? Where to?"

"As the flow takes you."

Then at last he moved his hands apart, and my body was yanked into his hands once more.

This time Cars was there. I landed flat on my back on a wide open patch of land, with him looking down at me. "Took you long enough, Jorge Joestar," he said. "What were you doing?"

Before I could answer, his fist hit me and sent me spinning through the air, but my cheekbone didn't break or anything so...I guess this was Cars holding back? Compared to his fight with Dio, anyway. When I landed, a disc popped out of my forehead, and Cars took that and stuck it in his own head for a moment, then went, "Hmm," and put it back into me so I could move again. "So this isn't the real world. It seems real enough," he said, looking around. I looked around myself. It was very dark, and there was nothing around us. I assumed it was night, but there was no moon or stars above us. We must be near a country town of some sort, but from where we were there was barely anything that looked like

city lights. Yet unlike London, it wasn't completely desolated; there were still signs of life. I could see bonfires burning, and even a few car headlights being used for illumination. But there was nothing in the sky above. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I could tell it wasn't just cloudy, either; there were no clouds. So why couldn't we see the moon and stars?

This made no sense. Wait...I'd heard about this before, back in the real world.

In Morioh.

Before Pucci sped up time, just before we blasted through the history of the universe thirty-six times, Narancia handed me a phone. The pebble phone. I'd spoken to Bruno Buccellati.

The sky's gone pitch black, no moon or stars.

He'd described this same thing.

I'd let it go in one ear and out the other but this was pretty fucked up. And I couldn't believe something this fucked up was happening everywhere. I ran across the dark field until I found a gate. It had the name of the school on it. "Budogaoka Academy."

This was Morioh!

"Hey! Jorge Joestar!"

I'd been staring at the gate, lost in thought, and looked up to find Cars standing right next to me, looking exasperated.

"You have a bad habit of not hearing when people speak to you."

"Yeah, if I'm focused on something else. Sorry. What?"

"Look," he said, and nodded at the sky. I looked up, and some building had searchlights aimed upwards, and the light had caught a huge squid swimming through the sky. It was genuinely

massive, at least a kilometer long. But even giant squids didn't ever get that long.

And a moment later I realized I was looking up at the giant squid's mantle, but that itself was weird. Squids swim with their mantles upwards, but I should be looking at the squid's underside right now. This squid was swimming upside-down. "What the...?"

The squid seemed to be interested in Morioh, and the huge eyes on either side of it were looking at us. I heard cries and shouts in the distance and turned to see a giant sperm whale come over the horizon, also swimming upside-down. It came up to the top of the sky, and bit into the squid. The squid's tentacles writhed around its mouth, using its suckers to desperately fight back, but it just kept forcing the squid farther inside and soon vanished off the other horizon.

"This entire town is floating upside-down in the ocean," Cars said, as if stating the obvious.

Given what we'd just seen, no other explanation seemed to fit. What was up with this parallel world? Were there worlds this batshit different? This was straight up fantasy or fantasia. But no, that wasn't right. I wasn't sure about the ocean part, but Buccellati and the others had reported the lack of stars and moon, and that was in the real world. I should follow up on that.

I still had the pebble phone! I took it out of my pocket. I'd forgotten to give it back to Narancia after talking to Buccellati on the deck of Das Boot. I tried calling him. I hit redial and it rang.

He answered.

"Hello? Narancia!" Buccellati said.

"Uh, it's Jorge."

"Hunh? Which one!?"

Which...? "Uh...the adopted one..."

"The Japanese one! Of course!"

"? You've met some other Jorge?"

"We've got an English Jorge Joestar here."

I might be a detective but even my head was spinning.

I asked Buccellati to brief me on events at the Arrow Cross House.

Shiobana Haruno had found Jorge Joestar lying on the road in Morioh, badly injured, and had taken him to Arrow Cross House, healed him, and the moment he was better he'd begun solving the mystery, figuring out who'd killed Kira Yoshikage and Diavolo, and pointing out that the killer had a Stand that sped up time, at which point the killer, Enrico Pucci, stepped out of hiding, so Shiobana Haruno had taken a mysterious arrowhead that had been inside Sugimoto Reimi's body and stabbed it into his own Stand, which evolved it and allowed him to beat Pucci by sending him into a void world where neither life nor death existed but Jorge Joestar then went on to prove that Shiobana Haruno / Giorno Giovanna was actually Diavolo's alternate personality and the same person as the big boss of the Passione Family they'd been fighting all along, and the only reason Shiobana Haruno was still moving was because he was just a hollowed out skin inhabited by Antonio Torres, a zombie Tsukumojuku had accidentally brought here from 1904 and who had been the one who murdered the three detectives, including Tsukumojuku, and a moment later Shiobana Haruno threw Antonio Torres out, repaired Diavolo's body, moved over to it, and in his guise as Diavolo attacked Jorge Joestar, went through the door in the floor of the Cube House, entered into an infinite fall loop and then vanished into thin air! That made sense, I thought. "So Jorge Joestar and Shiobana Haruno have traveled through time, then?"

Buccellati didn't seem to follow so I explained that the Cube House, the predecessor to the Arrow Cross House, was actually a time travel device. We'd fallen through that hole and ended up in

England in 1920, and after that astronaut Enrico Pucci's Stand had suddenly mutated, sped up time, and brought Great Britain to the current timeline but Pucci himself had disappeared and I guess for some reason he'd gone to Arrow Cross House and murdered two very bad men, and that reason was almost certainly something to do with the terrifying vampire named Dio Brando...at which point Buccellati said, "What!?! Dio Brando!?"

"Yes."

"Wait. We're currently interrogating Antonio Torres, and we just got the initials D.B. out of him," he said, and put the phone down a second. Wait, none of this was what I'd meant to ask him about...and then a girl picked up the phone.

"Hello? Japanese Jorge?"

It was Sugimoto Reimi. "Uh, yes."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. I'm in Morioh, but there's an upside-down whale swimming across the sky."

"Oh, that's just how Morioh is right now. We seemed to have been flipped over somehow."

"Hunh? So the upside-down whales...?"

"Yes. We've seen octopuses and schools of mackerel. It's pretty nuts. We've even had some sharks."

A parallel world, similar to the real world but distinct.

This world might seem totally insane, but it was similar to the real one after all. It just wasn't real.

"Jorge," Sugimoto said, "I have a favor to ask."

"What?"

"I'd like you to find the English Jorge Joestar."

"Got it," I said. Before I knew it.

But it felt so natural.

"Thank you. It's a big help."

There was a rustling sound as she handed the phone off.

"Yo, Buccellati here. Yeah, Dio Brando's behind everything. Second I said his name Antonio Torres started crying and then he fucking pissed himself. Ugh. But some other worrying information came out. According to Antonio Torres, Giorno Giovanna is this Dio Brando's real son, and since he was half-Japanese he helped make the murder displays look more Japanese for Dio Brando. I can't say if that's true or not, but it does make a certain amount of sense. Anyway, I'd love to know where Giorno is, but at present we're trapped in Morioh with no way out. Should we try diving into the Cube House hole, Jorge Joestar?"

If they time traveled, would the Morioh residents be able to get back home? Were they time traveling in the first place?

No, they were upside-down in the ocean.

"Hmm...I dunno if you can get back where you started if you're time traveling."

"Is that so? Hmm. Then what should we do?"

"....."

"Your phone might stop working again, and this could well be our last chance to contact the outside world."

Where I was right now didn't exactly qualify as the outside world, but...wait a second. "You've been trying to call me? And you couldn't get through?"

"Yes, I've tried a number of times. Couldn't reach you once. I didn't understand what Narancia was saying, figured there was no point in talking to him. I mean, he said you were in England, but apparently that was actually true."

"When we were in England, you got through."

"Yes. But since then I haven't been able to get through at all. We can use it within Morioh just fine, but..."

"....." This must be a hint, I thought. These phones ignored the laws of physics, calling anywhere, even allowing them to call me here in a parallel world that didn't even exist, but there were

times when they couldn't get through. What could the cause be?

"You couldn't get through to anywhere outside Morioh?"

"No, we did. We contacted a number of Passione branches and pulled what strings we could. We can move the military and government to a degree, but that didn't help our situation at all."

"...then the only place you couldn't reach was England."

"Apparently."

If distance didn't matter, space time didn't matter, and the dimension of the world didn't matter, then what could ever stop these phones getting through? Was there something special about England in 1920? Well, it wasn't 1920 any more. Thanks to Pucci it had gone through the birth and death of the universe thirty-six times and wound up in the present day...I thought, but wait, that actually wasn't correct.

Maybe England wasn't technically in modern times. Great Britain existed in the year 2012, but the flow of time on the island might still be 1920.

After all, England didn't have the rhinoceros beetle's barrier armor, it had Antonio Torres, a zombie with a conscious mind.

While I was watching Pucci fast forward the history of the universe, I'd figured that out. Figured out that consciousness was the point that divided the flow of time. This had nothing to do with any superpowers, it was something we all had, every day.

And because of that, I knew what was happening with time in Great Britain.

To those in England, it was nothing more than a transparent wall, but to Antonio Torres it was his own belly. The world outside was 'outside' to us, but to Antonio Torres it was 'inside his belly'. His perception reversed it. The only thing that counted as 'outside' to Antonio Torres was the island of Great Britain, and he wasn't thinking at all about what lay inside his belly, and even though he could see it, he didn't really feel it. Just like all of us don't really

think about, look at, or feel anything in our stomachs unless shit gets really weird. So time within England was still 1920 from thirty-six universes ago.

That's why England was still here, intact. The universe had looped thirty-six times, and everything outside of Great Britain had died and been born again each time, but Great Britain itself had remained exactly the same because the sped up time was outside of England, inside of Antonio's stomach. In other words, without meaning to, Antonio Torres had protected Great Britain from the death of the world. His consciousness separated the flow of time. The same way time flowed differently inside and outside of us all.

But our internal time was not always different from that outside of us. We were constantly adjusting our internal time to match the time outside of us. We looked at our watches. Made use of calendars. Concocted schedules, built routines, and believed we should be doing X at time Y. When talking to people we matched both subjects and tempo. So many ways we sync our internal time to the world outside. Keeping us aligned with our peers. It would be much harder to remain isolated, in a world of your own. In a world of my own? Cars had just accused me of doing just that.

You have a bad habit of not hearing when people speak to you.

Yeah. Same thing. Which led me to one conclusion.

Thinking hard sped up your internal time, allowing you to use more time than passed outside of you. Concentration or even desperation made time denser, and extended it. To be even more precise, the thoughts in your conscious mind extended the time you had. Thoughts that were fun, sad, or flustered were too simple

and did less to extend the time. Hence "Time flies when you're having fun". Thinking did the opposite.

So what powered the reverse effect, Pucci's sped up time, was the simplicity of his thoughts. With thinking, 'simple' meant clearing your mind of everything else, which was what happened when you believed wholeheartedly in a single thing. For example, Pucci's belief in 'God' was so absolute it might well have caused time to speed up like that.

"Hey! Argh...have the phones stopped working again? Hey! Jorge Joestar, are you there?"

Crap, I was doing it again. But I had the answer.

I'd been thinking just now. I'd been thinking earlier, in the school grounds. On both occasions, my internal time had come unstuck from the time around me. And because of that, I'd been unable to hear Cars and Buccellati talking to me. This happened all the time, but that same thing was happening on a larger scale to England right now. They'd been able to place a call from Morioh in 2012 to England in 1920 thirty-six universes ago. But once England came to this world in 2012 they couldn't get through any more. The gap in time wasn't a problem, but something in the same time but desynced from it couldn't hear a thing.

Then if we broke the rhinoceros beetle's armor, the wall made of Antonio Torres, time would start to sync up again. And calls would get through. But was that a good idea? That England belonged in 1920, thirty-six universes ago. Should we really force it to join the modern world?

"Hey! Jorge Joestar, are you there?" I heard, again.

Indecision had made me think too hard again. "Yes."

"At least answer!"

"Sorry, lost in thought."

"You come up with an answer yet? How can we flip Morioh back over?"

Oh. I hadn't been thinking about that at all. Couldn't exactly admit that, so I said, "Um..." and quickly began thinking about it, but given how Morioh was the center of the world's attention and surrounded by the American army if it were to suddenly flip over in the middle of the ocean it would hardly go unnoticed. They'd have started rescue operations immediately. Giant squid lived deep in the ocean, but sperm whales ranged from 1000-3000 meters. Not a problem for modern submersible technology. But even if a sub found Morioh the town was protected by the rhinoceros beetle's armor, which was strong enough to deflect missiles, and since we were underwater they couldn't risk breaking through the barrier anyway. If there was a way to flip us...but there was no technology or machine on Earth that could do that. This wasn't something we could solve with a few cranes. So how had we flipped in the first place?

"It's your fault," Buccellati said. "It got dark the moment you crashed here on your way back from Mars. Must have been the shock of impact."

Really? When we'd touched down Cars' ship had almost entirely burned up and it was basically just Cars and us so there really shouldn't have been that much of an impact.

Did this have something to do with time traveling through the Cube House?

But Tsukumojuku and Shibana Haruno had both used the time device, and nothing happened to Morioh when they did, so that seemed unlikely.

What the heck was making Morioh move, anyway?

I didn't know. But at face value Morioh had turned into a giant insect. It appeared to have more than six legs, and seemed to be alive. It could swim. Based on Nero Nero Islands behavior, it

could walk on land as well. Could it also turn itself upside-down? I doubted it. I mean, it was a bug.

Bugs never turned themselves over on purpose. That would be a threat to their survival. All insects flipped on their back would immediately put all their attention on trying to flip themselves back over. Morioh must be doing that now. It must be desperately trying to get itself back upright. But it couldn't. What was stopping it?

An injury? No, there was no reason why its legs would get hurt underwater. Was there any other explanation? I couldn't think of any...unless something was on top of Morioh's belly, preventing it from turning over.

Was something on top of Morioh?

What could be that big? Nero Nero Island was much too small by comparison. It had to be a bigger island. But just before Morioh flipped, we'd seen the islands from the air as we fell, and Nero Nero Island had been on top of Morioh, with no other islands of any significant size anywhere in sight. But I knew at least one island that didn't exist in this time until later. Great Britain.

Was that on top of Morioh's underside?

Had Great Britain flipped Morioh in the first place? Could a large rhinoceros beetle take a small one out? Or perhaps Morioh had sensed the larger rhinoceros beetle approaching and flipped in an attempt to get away from it. Showing your belly was a common sign of submission. Even with bugs.

"Um," I said. "I think England is on top of Morioh. So if we can get England to move, Morioh will probably right itself."

From his perspective, this must have come out of nowhere. It took Buccellati a moment to absorb it, but being in upside-down Morioh must make you fairly used to things like this, because all he said was, "Then make it move."

"Mm...but Great Britain's been moving the whole time."

"Hunh? It has? Then it'll be off Morioh soon?"

It would have been off it ages ago. Great Britain has swum across The Ocean faster than the speed of sound, and was almost at New York. What would happen if Great Britain made land in the United States with Morioh still stuck underneath it?

Would it walk across America with Morioh stuck to its belly like a tick? Removed from the water, would Morioh be able to cling to Great Britain upside-down? Would it fall off? And land on top of New York City? Before it even hit land the water would get shallow. I wasn't quite sure where Morioh was, but the water would clearly stop being deep enough long before Great Britain came ashore, so would we get caught on the sea floor? If we did, would Great Britain run us over, trampling us under all its legs?

Um?

All these sounded terrible, and just before Cars dragged me into this parallel world Funny and The Funniest made, we'd been within sight of New York. Uh-oh. This could be really bad? But should I really tell Buccellati how bad it was? Was there anything people here could do about it?

Nope, not a thing. We'd thought Kira Yoshikage was moving Morioh, but he was dead, and the bug was still going, which meant that theory was highly suspect. At most, 'Kira Yoshikage's emotions influenced Morioh' or 'Kira Yoshikage being in trouble and Morioh starting to move just coincidentally happened at the same time'. After all, there were four rhinoceros beetles. It seemed like a real stretch to assume all four started moving at the same time for four completely different reasons.

But what the heck should I do? I couldn't just say nothing and let what happened happened. Should I tell them to run away, even if they have to time travel? Yeah, as a last resort, sure. Time travel should be avoided as much as possible, but shit could start going down any second now. I told him to gather as many Morioh

citizens in the Arrow Cross House as he could. They might be able to have them all time travel, and if not, Arrow Cross House might be able to handle the impact of whatever was about to happen.

But Buccellati said, "Oh, did I not mention? When those arrowheads came out of Sugimoto Reimi the Arrow Cross House turned back into Cube House. So it has no way in or out, no doors, no windows. Just four walls. We can't bring anyone here, and have no idea how to get out ourselves. Reimi herself doesn't know, and she can steer the Cube House around but it rolls like a die so that would expose anyone stored under the Arrow Cross House."

Then Morioh was entirely on its own, and only the people inside the Cube House had any way of escaping? Even their Stands couldn't help?

"There are no Stands that can turn flipped land back over. We can roll the Cube House, sew things with a needle and thread, make phones, replay human memories as holograms, spread mass delusions to large crowds, and have little drag queens kick some bullets around. All useless here, right?"

Why little drag queens? Whatever. Point is, he was right, none of those sounded like they could save Morioh. I had to hurry. This could start happening any moment. "Um, Buccellati," I said, and then explained what I knew and what I feared.

"Uhh...what are we supposed to do with that?"

I didn't have an answer.

"Hey, Jorge Joestar," Buccellati said. "Get England off us. We're gangsters, we'll end up OK somehow, but the people outside the Cube House are civilians. You've got to save them somehow."

Exactly. I hung up and turned to Cars. "We've gotta get back to England."

Cars grinned. "That's what I brought you here for. Think, detective. While you figure out a way to get back to England, I'll entertain our guest."

Entertain...? Mm? What guest? I looked up, and someone came down out of the moonless, starless sky and landed in the darkness of the school yard. From what I could see in the darkness, he had long hair, and was half-naked.

"Another 'me'," Cars said. There was a pop and this new Cars' entire body lit up. Not just one color, either. Intricate light patterns roamed the surface of his skin. It was clearly 'Cars'.

"Heh heh. Light mode?" Cars chuckled. "Interesting. Seems like he's become the Ultimate Thing, too. And wants to see how that mode works in a fight."

Cars too a step forward, and the other 'Cars' held his hand up, palm towards him.

".....?"

Cars stopped. The other 'Cars' smiled and, still glowing, he straightened up, let the smile fade, and put his back into a punch that hit only air. Zzzunn! Brilliant lights danced. His arms spinning, he raised himself up, and then punched to the side. Ruuummmble! A swirl of light spread out around him.

"What...?" Cars said, not getting it. But I did.

This was a dance. Cars had wanted to see how to fight with light, and the other 'Cars' was showing him without the need to actually exchange blows.

Shhaaa! Papapapapapa! Boom boom! Shhaaaa! Papapapa! Boom Boom!

Firing flames of light, Cars moved like a black belt, and the light's movements gradually changed. At first they burned bright and aggressive, but then they started shimmering up against 'Cars', as if protecting him.

Then 'Cars' made the lights expand, growing more intricate, and the shimmering lights caressing his body began flowing in reverse as well, and suddenly there were two of him and he began moving still faster, making more copies of himself. Glowing 'Cars'

flowers blooming in the school yard that exploded, scattering in all directions, or flitted at random, each showing a different style of martial arts, each wrapped in different lights, firing light all around. Then the lights grew even brighter and the variations increased in number and the array of copies added a third dimension and soon Budogaoka Academy's campus was filled with blinding light cast by a giant mandala pyramid that made me forget to breathe.

It was such a spectacle I forgot to think, but beside me Cars said, "I've already understood his point, so why does he not stop?"

"I think...he's not just doing it for you. He's doing this for himself, as well. Like...something he needs to express, something he needs to leave behind."

"This is a parallel world. It isn't real. Nothing will remain, so how can this have meaning?"

"Of course it has meaning! Don't be stupid, Cars."

".....?" Cars looked back at the 3D light temple. A tower of light suddenly growing in the middle of pitch black Morioh was drawing people in, and quite a crowd had assembled. Some were just here for the fireworks, completely unaware that this was an ultimate being burning his life out. Then the light copies rejoined together as one 'Cars' and he shouted at the sky.

"Mere moments ago I intended to take the sole chance I had of killing myself! But I came to understand! Why I ran across the back side of Mars for so long! And why, despite the stifling feelings boiling up inside, I am equally filled with joy! My flesh may not be able to die, but my life is as fragile as it was before, and can be snuffed out so easily! You, who are another 'me'! You are not special! You share the same sadness I feel! But that is a treasure! Rejoice, 'Cars'! You, too, can suffer!"

The Cars next to me did not visibly react. I couldn't read his expression at all. But he watched closely, and thinking. Holding the gaze of the dancing light 'Cars'.

His thoughts were so deep he didn't hear me or 'Cars' when we spoke to him. I didn't want to interrupt that, but we were in sort of a hurry, so I said again, "Cars, I thought of a way to get back to England."

This other 'Cars' showed no sign of surprise at the original Cars' arrival. So he was already aware of the existence of parallel worlds. He was fully aware that he was fake. How was it he already knew that?

Because he'd met 'Funny Valentine' in this world. And like in Monument Valley, he'd engaged in an experimental skirmish. I was sure 'Funny' had fought with 'Dirty Whatever'. And Cars had understood that Stand ability, and realized the truth about himself.

And then he'd said this.

Mere moments ago I intended to take the sole chance I had of killing myself!

The Ultimate Thing had learned of a way that he might die, and fully intended to do so, but instead he'd danced. How could the Ultimate Thing die? **Which means the real you can never be killed by any alternative yous.** Funny had said that. And the way this 'Cars' held his palm up to the real Cars, telling him to keep his distance. That must mean that if a real and a fake of anyone but Valentine met in a parallel world, something would happen that left only one alive. I'd better remember that, I thought. Seemed like it would be useful when we made it back to England.

And to get back to England, Cars and I looked for, found, and headed into a house at the edge of Morioh. Cars never looked more out of place than he did in that neat little garden.

Inside was a three person family eating dinner by the light of an emergency lamp.

The wife was Shinobu, a homemaker. The eldest and only

child was a grade school boy named Hayato. And the husband and father was Kawajiri Kosaku.

He was here. When he saw Cars step in he knew what was about to happen, and leapt to his feet. "Shinobu! Hayato! Scram!"

Between the half-naked man and her husband's reaction, Kawajiri Shinobu was at a complete loss. She bumped the table and spilled some hot soup on her hand. "Ow! What's going on!? 'Scram'!? Who are they? Do you know them?"

She began wiping her reddened hand with a towel, but Kawajiri Kosaku yelled, "Just get out!"

But Kawajiri Hayato's reaction was the polar opposite. "I knew it! You've been acting so weird! You're hiding something!"

I had Cars wait this out.

"Both of you! Out of this house right this instant! Listen to your father for once!" Kawajiri Kosaku said, desperately enough that Shinobu finally grabbed Hayato and dragged him out the back door, away from Cars. "Farther than that! Run!" Kawajiri yelled out the door after them, and once they were safely out of the garden he finally turned towards Cars, and tried to catch his breath. "Th-Thanks for waiting."

I was in a hurry. I'd been here almost an hour. Cars took a step closer and said the keyword. "You're Kira Yoshikage?"

Kawajiri Kosaku laughed, then spoke, sounding choked up.

"You're right. I'm a serial killer."

There was a tiny Killer Queen on his shoulder. He'd set off Bites the Dust.

Boooooooooooooooooooooooooooooommm!

All we heard was the explosion, and I let Cars handle all the

fire and the shockwave. A bomb couldn't kill Cars. Cars, with me inside him, was sent back in time an hour. Before meeting 'Cars' in the Budogaoka Academy school yard, before seeing the sperm whale eat the giant squid, before The Funniest sent us to a parallel world from Funny's parallel world and before the conversation I had with Funny there, back an hour ago, to Picadilly Circus.

We made it in time.

Funny spread his hands again, and turned towards Cars.

"Dojaaaaaaaaan!" he said, grinning.

".....? A magic trick?"

I watched this exchange, but this time I knew everything that was about to happen. Before going to see Kawajiri Kosaku I'd had Cars swallow me. Making him promise not to digest. So Bites the Dust had sent me back an hour, but since I was inside Cars, I'd been protected from the explosion, and since my body was safe, so was my consciousness barrier, and since that was safe the flow of time within me remained intact and I remembered everything. My theory had been that to send people back in time internally and externally he had to shatter the shell of consciousness, their skin. That's why he needed the explosion. But since I was unharmed, I remembered, even if Cars had forgotten. Now it was my turn.

This was my second time watching these events, and they were going by awful quick. But that was the difference between focused thinking and not. I wasn't thinking, I was just waiting for the right timing.

"Heh heh heh."

Warping his body to dodge another clap, Cars glanced over at Dio and grinned. "I figured out your Stand," he said.

As Funny went to clap again, Dio grinned, too.

"A moment too late," he said.

But as Dio spoke I yelled over him.

"Cars! Funny's gonna clap twice!"

Cars didn't even glance in my direction, but he reacted.

Cl-clap!

Two claps in rapid succession and Cars bent his body twice, dodging both.

"Hunh...!?" Funny squeaked. "How the hell...!?" Dio said, glaring at me, and my legs started shaking so hard I wouldn't have noticed if I'd pissed myself and I lost all sensation in my upper body but I forced myself to grin back at him. That would have been a great time to introduce myself but given his history with the Joestar family I decided I'd better not.

"Suck it! I'm just your friendly neighborhood detective, dipshit!" I somehow managed to get this out without my voice breaking, but halfway through he lost interest and looked away, which rather took the wind out of my sails.

While Dio's attention was on me, Cars had bent his body still further and punched Funny out of the air. Bam! "Unh...!" Dio grinned, showing no concern at all for Funny, who was flung quite a distance away.

"Hmph! You think you've second guessed me? Do you think Dio would ever just throw ONE knife!?"

What?

"Prepare to be astounded!" Dio said, and as he did, I was

genuinely astounded. Even Cars looked pretty dang astounded.

Behind Cars stood another Dio, and he slid his hands under Cars' arms, and locked them behind his shoulders.

The moment he had Cars trapped, to his right a group of Funny Valentines appeared, three high and three across for nine Funny Valentines in all, and to his left a three by three grid of The Funniest Valentines appeared, nine The Funniest Valentines in all, and each tightly placed grid of Valentines had eighteen hands, making for thirty-six hands all about to clap down on Cars as time began flowing again.

"Auuuughhh!" Cars yelled and

Cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-cl-clap!

Thunderous applause as eighteen pairs of hands clapped down on him. And before I knew it only the pile of nine Funny Valentines and the pile of nine The Funniest Valentines was left, and Cars and the other Dio were gone.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ultimate Thing or not, if you don't bother thinking you're nothing but a useless monkey! The new thing born from thirty-six souls? That would be the brand new parallel world Funny and The Funniest share! A world with no exit or entrance, and your new best friend! That world has a fourteen words of its own, so seek them out and enjoy yourself forever!" Dio laughed his head off. I knew what he'd done. First, Funny had gone to The Funniest's parallel world and found Dio Brando and brought him here. Then Funny had found nine The Funniest that could use Dirty Whatever, and The Funniest had found nine Funnys that could also use Dirty Whatever, bringing them all here. You see, because of the one Stand per person thing, in Funny's parallel worlds there were no Funnys with Stands, but in his parallel worlds there were a lot of The Funniest, and he just had to gather ones that had Dirty Whatever. Same went for The Funniest collecting Funnys. And while time was stopped, they'd all been placed. With

so many Funnys and The Funniest around him there was no way of even knowing which parallel world Cars had been sent to. All I knew was that whichever Funny or The Funniest had landed the deciding clap, the only way to get there was if they sent you there. It might well be a world that Funny and The Funniest shared, and it might be one of the worlds they each had that were mutually exclusive.

Either way the only way to get to that world was right now while all the Funnys and The Funniest were still here.

I screamed, "Caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaars! Come baaaaack!"

I didn't know why I was screaming like that. Cars was scary as shit and I should be relieved he was gone but for some reason I wanted to see him again.

Dio must have enjoyed my scream, because he looked at me and chuckled. "As a reward for catching me off guard, I'll tell you one thing. When Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap sends someone to another world, the entrance, the exit, the place they were caught between, continues to function as a passage for a short while longer. So perhaps that wretched scream of your reached Cars' ears. Perhaps Cars can follow that voice and find his way back here. But he's a step too late for that, too!"

Why? I knew the answer already. Because the Funnys and The Funniest brought from other dimensions could not normally exist at the same time. That was why Cars had silently held up his hand back in the parallel Morioh.

The instant after Cars vanished, it began. The Funnys and The Funniest bumped shoulders with each other, and where they made contact they began melting into each other. It was like a pile of Menger Sponges, and as they fused together pieces of them rolled away, crumbling to nothing with a crackling sound, rupturing and vanishing. Nine Funnys and nine The Funniest all colliding and collapsing. The hands that had swallowed Cars shattered, and were

gone.

Good-bye, 'Cars'.

Watching the eighteen Valentines crumble to nothing from a distance, Dio laughed. "Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I am the true emperor! I am the pinnacle of all creation! Everything in this world, no matter which loop of history, no matter which parallel world, all of it is Dio's to control!"

Which is exactly when I spoke up.

"But there is always someone better. Someone will come along to surpass you. Those who strive for domination must live in the shadow of fear of something just like them. All you'll ever do is wait for someone to surpass you. What an exhausting way to live. But look closely. The one that surpasses you may not come from below. Without you ever noticing, they might already be looking down at you from far above. But if you think hard about that, if you really look at the big picture...that might well be a comfort to you. Good news, Dio Brando!"

Dio stared at me blankly. "What...?"

"Don't catch my drift?" I said. "Take a hint and look up."

".....?"

"This isn't advice. This isn't a motto for life. I literally mean 'look up'. Straight above your head."

I raised a hand, pointing above my head. "See it yet?"

Dio looked up.

And saw Cars, in the air above him, grinning down at him.

"What...!?" Dio yelled.

His wait over, Cars began dropping like a stone, straight at Dio.

"Like I said, I understand your Stand."

Behind Cars was the ultimate version of Dio's The World. The World Ultimate. There was some resemblance, but even at a glance you could tell it wasn't the same Stand.

".....!"

When Dio said nothing, Cars went on. "Heh, what? Never imagined you'd lose the game of out-guessing each other? Well, I can't blame you. Even I could never have handled that last stunt on my own. I slept for two thousand years on Earth, woke up in the middle of the 20th century, but shortly afterwards spent nearly ten quadrillion years running across the back of Mars. And you spent nearly a hundred years, from the end of the 19th century to the end of the 20th sleeping in a box. You may have seen all sorts of things about the future down there, but I imagine you never once read a detective novel. Even after you woke, it would never enter your head that you should catch up on the last hundred years worth of mystery writing. Detective fiction is born and evolves throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in every universe. Both of us slept right through it, never noticing, never realizing. Neither of us could ever hope to match a detective who grew up on that and lives that life for real."

Ohhhh, you shouldn't have! ♡ "I didn't do anything special, Dio. I just had this sense there was gonna be another twist. And figured out how to turn the tables on it. I just have a whole lot of experience with mystery novel twists and turns."

This was the honest truth.

But Dio still paid me no attention, his attention all directed to Cars, and as I said 'tables' he shouted, "Impossible! The emperor of this world is me! Without question! That is a fixed truth!"

That reminded me of something.

Cars chuckled. "Where does that confidence come from?"

Where did mine come from?

"I am Dio, and I will win! I have been promised the final victory!"

By who?

"By who?" Cars asked.

And behind Dio I saw a shadowy figure, with long hair, his face hidden by a shadow seemingly unaffected by the direction of the sun. He was half naked, his rail thin body covered in wounds, and there was a crown of thorns on his head.

"I agree with everything," he said. "Keep going, call it off, do anything you like, do nothing at all."

It didn't seem like Dio could hear the voice coming from right behind him. He just kept screaming. The crown of thorns came out on his head, and the figure behind him vanished. "My blood calls to blood, and thus I know! I am the king of the world! I

rule everything!"

Oh, I thought. The way Dio talked was similar to the way I spoke about believing that I was a detective.

Beyond.

Dio Brando had one behind him, too.

"If you want it all that much, then let's do this!" Cars cried, and flitted down to Dio's level. Dio's The World Ultimate came out, but it was Cars' White Snake Ultimate that fought it.

Splat! White Snake Ultimate punched Dio's cheek, and Dio staggered back. A disc flew out of his head and fell to the ground, where it shattered, and The World Ultimate standing beside him fell apart, dissolving. "Now I will grant your wish! Make these all your own!" Cars said, and discs began flowing out of his head, and as fast as he could he slammed them into Dio's head. "One more!" Bloop, Dio's head swelled up, then returned to normal size. "And another, and another!" Bloop bloop! This time Dio's chest and belly swelled up and shrank. "More more more more!" Bloop! Bloop! Bloop! Bloop! Dio's entire body swelled and shrank, waves running across it as it bent in all kinds of hideous directions. The speed of Cars' arms grew faster and faster, like a punch volley, until discs were slamming into Dio too fast for it to shrink and he began swelling into a hideous ball of flesh. "Wa ha ha ha ha! How's that feel!? You full yet!?" Cars laughed. Dio's face looked down at Cars over his swollen body. His expression hollow, but there was still a light in his eyes.

Uh-oh, I thought, but Dio opened his mouth, and I heard what he said. "This is right. There's no mistake. Everything is taking me where I need to go."

That sounded like what the wounded man with the crown of thorns had said.

I agree with everything. Keep going, call it off, do anything you like, do nothing at all.

Dio pulled something sharp from near his hand. I yelled, "Cars! Watch out!"

Even without my warning, Cars saw the weapon. Before Dio could take a swing, Cars slammed one last attack home, and said, "Everyone has their limits! Can yours contain the entire world!? Let your own arrogance lead to suffering! Learn just how limited you really are! Ha ha ha ha! Now the finishhhhh!"

He put one last disc in Dio's head, and Dio's swollen body reached its limit. I braced for the explosion, and Cars waited, a grin on his face.

But Dio just said, "Thanks."

".....!?" Cars finally looked concerned.

"With Pucci gone, you're the only one who could take me to Heaven, Cars."

Dio swung the weapon in his hand. Cars dodged, but to no avail, because Dio was aiming for White Snake Ultimate.

"My Angel!" Dio said.

And exploded.

Bam!

Chunks of Dio were flung all around. His head, his eyes, his ears, his spine, his torso, his head, his right hand, his left hand, and his legs, nine parts of him fell to the ground. But of course he was still alive. But unlike the earlier firework vaporizations, this time the bits of his body stayed where they were, making no move to reassemble.

Dio's head spoke, "So you were the 'Angel', Cars! The only other man who can control White Snake!"

I looked over at White Snake, and it wasn't looking right. It had a stab wound. Dio had thrust something into it, and that had remained inside its body. Something shaped like an arrow.

The arrowhead.

Shiobana Haruno had taken a mysterious arrowhead that had been inside Sugimoto Reimi's body and stabbed it into his own Stand, which evolved it.

Wounds could grant power. That could happen to Stands as well. The arrowhead burrowed into White Snake Ultimate, making the wound deeper. "Unh...what...did you do?" Cars asked. Even he didn't know.

Regardless of what Cars wanted, White Snake Ultimate's wound grew deeper and deeper and soon it began evolving. Like with Pucci's version, an arrow motif appeared on the Stand's three faces and six arms. The arrow was a part of it now, and the Stand's new power emerged. Like Pucci's C Moon, it could control gravity.

"I've been down this road before," Dio said. "Enrico Pucci failed me twice, but that only served to lead me to this moment. Everything is agreed upon. The third time's the charm. The circle will be closed. Why? Because I am here."

The sheer force of his confidence was getting to Cars. "Not if I have anything to do with it!" he yelled, and pulled out a Stand with even longer rabbit ears than Funny's. Ultimate D4C.

"Too late," Dio said, and Dio's head and the other eight bits of him fled Cars' fist, floating through the air. Just like Pucci had levitated off the deck of Das Boot. Mm?oh.

I'd just remembered that I still had the personalized Stand disc in my head, the version of Das Boot Cars had made for me. I could fight. I didn't know what Dio was up to, but I wasn't about to let him get away with it. "Das Boot!" I shouted. Look, by this point yelling your Stand name was just how these things worked.

Whoom! A massive submarine appeared, resting on top of my head. It wasn't heavy. It had corporeal form only to the extent I needed it to. The only thing it did was prevent me looking up. I popped out the headset periscope and locked on to Dio. "FIREEE!" Pssht pssht pssht! Cruise missiles shot out of it and headed for the floating bits of Dio but giant hands slapped them away. Boom bam boooooom. Behind the explosions loomed the massive upper body of Antonio Torres, reaching down out of the sky. You again!? I fired some more missiles, but Antonio Torres' dumb ass knocked them all aside. While that happened the bits of Dio began rising up, and with him went C Moon Ultimate Requiem, now completely freed from Cars' control.

"Shit," I said. But another shadow crossed my periscope. I looked closer, and saw the largest version of Narancia's Das Boot racing upside-down across the inside of the sky. It was running on the barrier that covered Great Britain; in other words, on the side of Antonio Torres. "Goooooo!" I yelled, and unleashed some cover fire. Antonio Torres knocked all these missiles aside as well, and, as the pieces of Dio got closer, he opened his mouth wide. I knew we couldn't let him swallow those. Antonio has swallowed Pucci, too. Inside Antonio's belly = Outside England, and once Pucci was there he'd completed his transformation. Narancia's Das Boot was still filling the sky with missiles, but he wasn't doing any more damage than I was. We were fighting a giant zombie. He was dead to begin with, and it didn't look like the exploding missiles were causing him any significant pain. What else could we do!? But just before panic really set in, I looked through my periscope and saw Elizabeth standing on the deck of Das Boot. What was she planning? Skirt flying, she ran up the upside-down deck, and leapt off the end. She was hanging from the rhinoceros beetle armor/Antonio Torres's body by her fingertips alone! "Ahhhh! Holy shit!" I shouted but she couldn't hear me. Instead, she curled her legs up till her toes were

against the barrier wall, and then began running across it upside-down. Dear god! Ha ha ha! I couldn't help laughing out loud. How the hell was she keeping her skirt from flying up? Before I even got over my excitement she was dodging Antonio's giant punches, still upside-down. She had one hand on her muffler and was waving it like she was throwing invisible shuriken so may she was unraveling the thread and using that to perform these acrobatics? She was like the world's most graceful Spiderman. It took her no time at all to reach the base of Antonio Torres' massive belly.

Where had Dio got to? He was still pretty far from Antonio Torres' mouth. What was Elizabeth about to do? I looked closer, and she took out a pendant with a red stone from her shirt front, took a tight grip on it, and shouted. Das Boots sonar system was able to pick it up for me. "I am Jorge Joestar's guardian! I fight to protect that beautiful bloodline! You can do this, Lisa Lisa! Yeah! Put everything you got into this! Antonio Torres, you were always an idiot! Good-bye! Here we go! Sunset Orange Overdrive!"

Elizabeth put the hand holding the red stone to Antonio Torres' belly, and opened her hand, pinning the stone between him and her palm. A tremble ran over her. Pshhht! A red firework went off, and a ripple that actually was the color of sunset ran across Antonio's translucent belly, around his sides onto his back, over his shoulders and down his arms, up his chest and neck to the top of his head, the ripples building off each other and rolling back and forth. Antonio Torres let out an unholy shriek. "Ughhaaaaaaaahh!"

Floating towards him, Dio yelled, "Don't scream, you little bitch! Stand your ground and inhale me! Be good for one last thing before you die! Inhale! Stop screaming and take the biggest breath of your life!"

His entire body burning from the red ripples, Antonio tried pursing his trembling lips, but only succeeded in making strangled noises. No matter what he did, he couldn't inhale.

"You worthless shit!" Dio screamed. "Can't you do anything you're told!? That's why nobody ever loved you! That's why they all pushed you away! Your mother peeled your filthy skin off in a desperate attempt to at least love the surface of you! You were always empty inside, and there was never anything in there that anyone could love! I bet even your mother couldn't believe it at first! Even after she peeled your god damn skin off she still couldn't find a single worthwhile thing about you!"

Antonio Torres was letting out strangled sobs, but try as he might he couldn't seem to get any tears flowing.

"If you can't even take a fucking breath, then die! Die as the useless piece of shit you were born to be! As a worthless piece of trash even your mother wished she'd never given birth to! You're a maggot! The manure left by the cattle in the barns in the Canary Islands is worth more than you have ever been! Jorge Joestar's a complete nincompoop but compared to how unsalvageably dumb you are, he looked almost acceptable!"

"Unhhhhhhh aahhh aughhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Stop fucking crying you flappy hollow! Put your fucking lips together and inhale! Do what I fucking say! Breathe in!"

I could hear a steady bam bam bam bam bam of missiles from Narancia's direction. I could hear shouting over the speakers, but that was Penelope. "Hey! Vampire! Just because he's a zombie, there's no excuse for that kind of language! Apologize this instant!" Some sort of beam shot out of Dio's eyes, slicing through all the missiles, and blowing them up. Boom boom boom boom! Dio kept shouting at Antonio over the explosions.

"Bwa ha ha ha! You spent the last twenty years trying to get back at them and all you did was make them pity you! C'mon! Your pathetic life is about to reach its suitably awful, pitiable, pathetic end! Ha ha ha! You failed to be of any use to anyone, did nothing for anybody, took nothing for yourself, and will die as useless as

the day you were born! Is that what you want, Antonio Torres!? Are you fine being shredded like your father by the same Hamon bitch who turned his ass to ash!? Are you happy to die without a single memory of manning up and accomplishing anything!? Hey! Antonio Torres! Think! I'm the only one who ever expected a single god damn thing from you! Are you prepared to leave this world having disappointed me!? To die without once having anyone be grateful to you, without once having anyone be glad you were born!? Are you OK with that!? Then I was a fool to expect anything from a piece of shit like you! I take back anything nice I ever said to you! You are nothing but a stupid worthless meaningless ugly little poison shit! Admit Jorge Joestar was right all along, that every action you took was wrong, and drop fucking dead!"

"Uuuuuuuuunghhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Noooooooooo!"

"Then inhale, Antonio Torres!"

"Unnnnhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Ff...fff...haaaaahhhhh!"

"Yes! First, let all the air out...!"

"Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!"

The thousand meter long upper half of Antonio Torres was turning to rags from the red ripples, and if this pathetic monster had just be a little bit dumber he might have died in time, but as he finally inhaled Dio was pulled up towards him and vanished between Antonio Torres' puckered lips. The missiles Narancia and I sent after him were too late, and exploded all over Antonio's face.

"Auuughhhh!"

The explosions caused a crack in Antonio's giant head, and he began crumbling from the crack out.

"Hey," someone said. I looked sideways. Cars was talking to me. "Stop attacking. If that zombie dies we won't be able to send England back in time. Don't kill him till this is all over. And Dio is about to speed up time. If that zombie isn't there, this island will be left behind and vanished when the universe restarts."

Cars-sempai was absolutely positively correct. Bravo. I had never imagined he had the same idea as me about the relationship between time and consciousness. I took out the pebble phone, but this was originally Narancias, and since I had it now, that left me with no way to contact him. I thought a moment and then gave the Das Boot's radio a shot. It worked! I told Narancia to knock off the attacks, and as him to make Elizabeth stop, too, and he didn't seem to get it but he stopped. He picked up Elizabeth, too. Once she was back aboard Elizabeth radioed me so I said we had to move Great Britain so we needed Antonio Torres a little longer and she said, "Understood. I've already given him a fatal level of Hamon, but I can add some resistant Hamon and slow the effects down. It'll prolong poor Antonio's suffering, but...I'll see if I can do anything about the pain he's in as well." Elizabeth was astonishingly kind to zombies. When I said as much she just said, "No? I'm just trusting you. Because you're also a Jorge Joestar. I'm in the state of mind to grasp at any straw."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that but she didn't seem to be inclined to clarify.

"It begins," Cars said. I looked up and through the crumbling belly of Antonio Torres I could see the pieces of Dio and C Moon Ultimate Requiem floating above the rhinoceros beetle's armor, and that Stand was still changing. Ruptures were appearing all over the surface of it, and as it crumbled away a horse and rider and clock emerged, a Stand even more fused with the arrowhead. Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem. And a second round of sped up time began...but what for? Next to me, Cars said, "What waits for us at the end of this?"

The universe repeating on a spiral staircase. And then...? I couldn't see the answer. Nothing came to mind at all.

But then someone spoke behind me. "We have a terrifying idea, Jorge Joestar." It was Funny and The Funniest but they both

looked white as a sheet.

"An idea?"

"Yes. No...it's already a certainty," Funny said. "Wait a sec, I'll check," The Funniest said, pulling out a cell phone and trying to call someone...but he couldn't get through.

"Oh," I said. "That won't work, but if you use this one from a parallel world you might be able to get through." I handed over the pebble phone, and told him how to use it. Funny clapped his hands and sent The Funniest to a parallel world. He came back a minute later. He just popped his head out from between Funny's hands, and said, "Yeah, just as we feared." Funny nodded, and said, "We believe Dio Brando is headed for the past beyond the future."

Beyond the dying Antonio Torres, Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem activated, and the sun began to spin around us.

Funny and The Funniest took turns explaining.

"The Valentines have two duties as leaders of the United States, two duties vital to the prosperity of our homeland."

"The first is to intervene in the Steel Ball Run, held at the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century."

"This is like a Valentine family ritual; more or less a practice run."

"The other is to protect the secret held in the underground facility beneath the Trinity Church in New York, and ensure that no one gets near it."

"The second duty is of the utmost importance, and we will stop at nothing to fulfill it, no matter what it costs."

"Even wars or genocide."

"That's why we're telling you. Needs dictate that we let you in on part of this secret."

"The underground facility contains the body of a holy man."

"Whoever possesses this body, whatever group they belong to, will possess eternal prosperity so long as they maintain control of the body."

"The body was gathered by our ancestor, thirty-five loops of the universe ago – the original Funny Valentine."

"The 23rd President of the United States."

"And the race where it was collected, thirty-five universes ago, was the first Steel Ball Run."

"There were nine pieces to that holy man's body, hidden across the American continent."

"Those nine pieces were the head, the eyes, the ears, the spine, the torso, the heart, the right arm, the left arm, and the legs."

"Exactly the pieces that Dio was just broken into."

As the universe ended and began again repeatedly, Funny said, "Cars, you placed nine discs in Dio, correct?"

The Funniest said, "Why is it Dio could not put himself back together after you did that to him?"

Cars laughed. "Those were Stand discs, but all nine were blank. However, they were all made by me, and the parameters were set to my own body. For a human, or even a vampire, the rule is one Stand per person. Even with blank discs his body tried to accommodate the new Stands, was unable to fit them in the space that originally held his Stand, and tried to compensate by splitting him into nice pieces."

"I...see."

"Any life form's capacity is somewhat flexible, but limited by nature. Vampire may be immortal like me but there is a massive difference between our capacities, and our abilities. Only I can truly call myself the Ultimate Being. And only I can actually handle

the Stands I make. The automobiles you drive don't run on just any fuel, do they? Dio Brando has attempted to accommodate that fuel by altering his own body, by splitting himself into pieces. And until the shock of that wears off, he'll remain that way."

"I see...!"

"I see...!"

"It isn't just the number of parts and the types of parts that match. The head of this holy man's body has a crown of thorns," The Funniest explained.

"There are holes in the palms of each hand, and through each foot," said Funny.

"These were believed to be stigmata, but perhaps we were mistaken."

"You saw it, too? Dio's head had a crown of thorns, and he had holes in his hands and feet."

"Dio's crown of thorns was a Stand, and if the holes in his hands and feet were not caused by crucifixion, but by some other injury..."

"Then we have made a terrible mistake. And all of this was planned so that we would make that mistake!"

"Dio is not a holy man."

"The polar opposite of one. Like Cars said, there is little to him but self-love and deceit."

"And if Dio is that body...then at the least we must rethink what we have put our faith in, and this secret becomes all the more urgent."

"And we have just verified one last thing. My wife, Scarlet, told me that the underground facility beneath the Trinity Church is long since empty."

".....!"

"The doors that can only be opened from the inside, were standing open, with no signs of tampering."

"Good lord."

"And we have no way of knowing when this happened. That facility has always been there. Even as the universe renewed itself, it remained."

"The holy man is a singularity."

"But that holy man is gone."

"And he was never holy. He was Dio Brando. At this point all we can do is abandon hope."

"Yes..."

"Look! The sped up time is coming to an end." The speed of the strobing sky was growing gentler. The blinding light and pitch darkness of the universe ending and beginning had passed, and we were down to the stars and moon and sun spinning around us. "Jorge Joestar, you appear to be standing there in a daze, but were you counting the universes?"

"How many was it?"

"Thirty-seven," I said.

".....!?"

"Check and see. Thirty-seven loops should have brought us back to the time we started in."

The sunset sky. American fighters scrambling overhead. In the distance, stuck to the outside of the rhinoceros beetle's armor on his frog-like Stand was this era's Funny Valentine. He was still there.

Seriously, god damn. The Funniest's grandfather, this other 'Funny Valentine', had clung so closely to the rhinoceros beetle's armor, to the inside of Antonio Torres' stomach, that like a tick or a parasite, he became part of Antonio Torres, and had ridden out the

sped up time. Exposing his flesh to thirty-six deaths and births of the universe.

What had that been like?

Elizabeth and Narancia's Das Boot were still hanging upside down from the sky next to the dying torso of Antonio Torres, and I had them check our current place and time. The island of Great Britain had come ashore in America, and right in front of us...well, right underfoot...was Manhattan Island.

The Funniest went to Funny's parallel world and used the pebble phone to make another call. When he got through to the First Lady, Scarlet, she was in a panic. "Are you OK!? What on earth is happening on that island!?"

Apparently Great Britain had vanished and then reappeared a few seconds later. After answering a flurry of detailed questions, The Funniest hung up and turned towards us. "We're back to July 24th, 2012, the same one we left."

Funny nodded. "In other words, we passed through thirty-seven universes and looped back to our world."

"Which means the universe I was born in is the world's final universe..." The Funniest paused, and looked at Cars. "And the one you come from is the first." Cars grinned back, but said nothing.

"And Dio Brando has closed the loop, with himself cast as a holy man who brings prosperity. He's taken the napkins from the banquet table," Funny said. Whatever the fuck that meant.

I looked up. Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem was floating out beyond Antonio Torres, but there was no sign of Dio Brando.

"I can't see him, but is Dio Brando still up there?"

"No, he's gone," Cars said, breaking his silence.

"How do you know?"

"That was my Stand originally, you know? It's still out of my control, but that effect is fading. Dio's gone, and the job he had for it is over."

"...so you'll be able to use that Stand again?"

"There is nothing I can or cannot do."

"....."

"I see," The Funniest said. "Then we can use that Stand to speed time up again and go to the universe where Dio is. If only we knew where...or when...that is."

"We know that," Cars said. "My Stand remembers when Dio left it. One universe after this one."

Funny thought for a moment. "Then we can use the Stand above us to speed up time and catch up to Dio?"

"Yes. But why would we do that?"

"....."

"To kill Dio Brando, who has now become this 'holy man'?" Cars grinned. "But this 'holy man' has granted you 'prosperity'. And you have fought to protect that."

"But..." The Funniest said. "Can we really let him get away with this?"

Funny added, "Perhaps our decision to honor him has led to a great many of the evils in this world."

"Heh heh heh," Cars sneered. "So the prosperity your holy man provided was merely a matter of perspective?"

".....!"

".....!"

"Then does it matter that the source of your prosperity was Dio Brando? Not like your history changes."

"No, it changes to a spiral staircase..."

"Only on the universal level," Cars said, dismissively. "I'm speaking on the world level. This world is a string of thirty-seven

universes, which form a loop. If you look at each universe, then a similar but distinct history repeats itself thirty-seven times, and then the exact same thirty-seven histories happen again."

Neither Valentine had anything more to say, so I spoke up. "So catching up to him by speeding up time is no good. You can't change history by following the axle of time. If you want to change history you can't chase him to the future, you gotta go back and fix things. That's just how time works."

Cars laughed. A happy, excited laugh. "Ha ha ha! What's the difference between going forwards and backwards in time?"

"...I dunno? But consciousness and space time are closely intertwined. The power of human consciousness...even Stands are not just like, weapons we pick up, but a power we make inside ourselves. And they can be so strong they control the flow of time in the entire universe! Sure, that might be an extreme example, maybe even a power so great only one person in all of recorded history has wielded anything like it, but even with more modest powers, even the most ordinary people have wills of their own, and, weak though it may be, they have a similar power. So like, if everyone on an island with lots of people living on it like Great Britain thinks about turning back time or denies a fact of history then it will have an effect, right?" I really had no basis for this, or I sort of did but I couldn't explain it logically and I'd never tried to tell anyone about anything like this. It was really awkward. But I was pretty sure I was right.

"Ha ha!" Cars laughed merrily. "A curse, is it?" he said. That was pretty similar, really. But he went on, "Hmph, but if we are to go back, how would we do it? We have a way to go forward, but have you thought of a way to get back?"

Exactly. "I'd really like if we could go to the Arrow Cross

House in Morioh – actually it's the Cube House now – but we can't access Morioh right now and the Cube House has no windows or doors and is just walls so you can't get in or out...and the way the Cube House time travel device works is sort of weird to operate so I'm not sure we could get to the time we wanted to."

"So?"

"So... I'm not sure, but I do have one thing worth trying."

"? And...? Spit it out."

"OK. You've heard of the Bermuda Triangle?"

Cars, naturally, had no knowledge of human legends. I gave him a quick run down and told him how Tsukumojuku had come from the Bermuda Triangle in 1904 to Nishi Akatsuki in 2012, how our two world maps compared, and how the Bermuda Triangle in 2012 overlapped what was now Nishi Akatsuki in 1904.

As I did I realized, "Are those the two Singularities? Nishi Akatsuki and the Bermuda Triangle."

Cars grinned. "Anyone who doesn't notice that will never be able to get to Heaven."

Once again I was impressed by Cars' ability to absorb new things. "But what is this 'Heaven'?" he asked.

"Hunh?"

"I'm aware that humans have concepts like the afterlife, the next world, heaven, and hell, but is the heaven referred to in those beliefs the same as the 'Heaven' we're talking about now?"

"....."

"I know that humans consider 'Heaven' a relaxing place. But did that apply to the Heaven Enrico Pucci was searching for? Dio used him and he wound up dying somewhere, right? And 'Heaven' comes from the message that got Enrico Pucci going in the first place. Who made that message and sent it to Enrico Pucci?"

In the air above Cape Canaveral in July 1999 was...

Cars didn't wait for me to answer. "And what happened to

the detective who came through this Bermuda Triangle?"

He died. Right after he got to Morioh. Buccellati had said he was killed by Antonio Torres.

Cars had read my memories on the spaceship, but he had no way of know that the mystery in the Cube House had been solved, and yet he said, "Antonio Torres is a zombie. Zombies are nothing but minions for vampires. They are made by vampires, and do everything for them. Is it a coincidence that out of the four rhinoceros beetles, only Great Britain has armor mixed with Antonio Torres so that people can get in and out? Like Enrico Pucci, that man," he glanced at The Funniest, who cowered. "And of course, the nine pieces of Dio Brando."

And we couldn't kill Antonio Torres. It was like Great Britain was held hostage.

"And look," Cars pointed to a photograph Narancia had sent to the pebble phone. "The modern Bermuda Triangle is right in front of where Great Britain is, outside Manhattan Island's armor."

Liberty Island, where the Statue of Liberty stood.

"But this Bermuda Triangle is also very close to the Trinity Church on Manhattan Island. And they just checked the facility underneath that church and found the body of the holy man was gone. They don't know when it vanished, but it might not have been somewhere in the last thirty-six histories of the universe; it might have been just a few moments ago. Thirty-six universes ago the Bermuda Triangle and Manhattan were on the same continent, but quite far apart. Now they've moved very close together, and only the Bermuda Triangle is exposed...doesn't that worry you at all? Can't you feel the vampire's unconscious glee as he waits for you to plunge into the trap he prepared? My point is, no matter how you look at it, out current situation is far too convenient."

I was too busy beating myself up to answer and there was no need to answer. He wasn't asking. He was ripping me apart.

Why is it humans choose to blind themselves the moment things cease to make sense?

Cars had said that to Pucci, but I was guilty of the same thing. Even as I'd attempted to go against the man who'd invented Heaven, I'd gotten excited about a miracle that same man had prepared. I'd gotten obsessed with poking at the puzzle Pucci had solved. Even though that puzzle itself was worth refuting.

"I'm loath to admit it," Cars said. "But at the moment this is all proceeding according to Dio Brando's plan."

It certainly was.

"It won't be easy pulling one over on him. That crown of thorns allows him to know the future accurately, in great detail, and for a long time to come. How do you plan to pull one over on him, to catch him by surprise? Think on that, Detective."

"....."

"Who is capable of surprising him? Who has already taken him by surprise?"

When I was dragged into Valentine's palms, he'd said,
"What the fuck...!?"

There was real surprise on his face.

I raised a hand. "Me. I can surprise Dio."

Then Cars asked, "Why can you do that?"

And the second singularity is you, Jorge Joestar.

Those were Funny Valentine's words, but it wasn't because

I was a Singularity. I'd chosen to forget that idea.

You are born only once in this world, and there is no replacement for you in any other universe, or in any parallel world.

He'd said that, but I had no way of verifying that, no reason to believe it. At the time, Funny Valentine was busy fighting Cars. There were things I found believable about his message, but at the moment, I didn't need to buy into it. And yet, I was still special. Why?

Dio's scream when Beyond stood behind him.

My blood calls to blood, and thus I know! I am the king of the world! I rule everything!

If the crown of thorns' range was limited to his blood...then "Because I'm adopted," I said.

I never dreamed having no blood relation to my parents would ever be a weapon. And only someone with a Beyond could defeat someone with a Beyond.

"That's right," Cars said. "I myself haven't let that vampire drink my blood, but it seems he ate another 'me', and that 'life' counts as me. He might well have some idea what I'll do. So we must rely on you."

"Er." I never dreamed Cars-sempai would speak to me that

way.

"So, figure out how to get back to the past and pull the rug out from under Dio."

"...wait, though, it isn't that...I mean, even when I stepped in Dio still had us dancing on the palm of his hand."

"Certainly, that vampire has a mysterious power, and an unusual drive. But you've been in your share of perilous situations and survived."

"Yeah, but you're a smart guy, Cars. It doesn't have to be me, does it? If I hadn't gone to that parallel world with you...if you hadn't pulled me after you, what would you have done?"

"The point of Valentine's plan was to overlap the parallel worlds. In other words, one layer wasn't enough. Because even though there's only one Stand per person, in the next universe someone with that same Stand might appear. The two Valentines prove that. And I can survive multiple universes, in this world or a parallel one. I would have sought out a Stand Master in that world, one who had the same Stand. And I would have found them. And I'd have used that Stand to return to the world I began in. I know that one more pass through history will lead to a world made of thirty-seven universes, so if I just wait long enough, I'll be able to return to same universe and time. Even if I couldn't find the Stand I needed if I wait through thirty-seven universes I could go to where another 'Valentine' would send another 'me' here, and get back to the world I came from."

Maaan, ultimate beings sure were ready to play the long, long, long game. "But if you did that, you and the other Cars would coexist, creating a paradox."

"That applies to the real world as well. No such paradox was created. Perhaps your intervention was inevitable, but I'm sure I would have thought of some means of escaping."

"....."

"So?"

"Hunh?"

"How do we outmaneuver Dio?"

Don't rush me, I thought, but I had already outmaneuvered Dio once, right? When I brought us back from the parallel world.

"Um, OK...but...?" I said.

"Spit it out."

"I only know one Stand that goes back in time."

"...and?"

"Could Kira Yoshikage's Killer Queen's Bites the Dust help us out here?"

That only took people back an our. But Cars grinned at me. "Explosions are hardly a threat to me."

"Whaaaat? But we're trying to get back thirty-six universes ago!"

"Time is also not a problem for me."

Kira Yoshikage from the parallel world was no use. If Bites the Dust activated Kira alone would be moved to the past of that parallel world, which wasn't the past we needed. It had to be the real world Kira Yoshikage...!

"But Kira Yoshikage is dead. In Morioh," I said. "This idea is impossible on the face of it."

"No, he isn't dead," Cars said.

"Hunh? No, he's dead, Pucci killed him."

"There is no need to believe Enrico Pucci."

"Hunnnh? But they found a lot of evidence..."

"They found it. You didn't. You're the detective here."

"Right, but even in the parallel world Kawajiri Kosaku was Kira Yoshikage."

"No. Kawajiri Kosaku was a bomb."

"But he confessed..."

You're right. I'm a serial killer.

Mm? I thought. This was a man tearing up in front of his family. Maybe what he means was that Bites the Dust had killed so many people he might as well be a serial killer? The fierceness with which he'd made his family run might well have been true love?

And Kira Yoshikage had a thing for women's hands. Yet when soup spilled on Kawajiri Shinobu's hand and she'd said, **Ow! What's going on!?** Kawajiri Kosaku hadn't shown any interest in the burned hand and yelled, **Just get out!**

I didn't remember if Kawajiri Shinobu had beautiful hands and hadn't checked in the first place, and maybe his wife and his victims weren't the same to him but I felt like a fetish like that was harder to conceal in the spur of the moment...my experience as a detective agreed. "Kawajiri Kosaku wasn't Kira Yoshikage."

Cars nodded. "I knew that right away, even in that parallel world. He didn't smell of blood at all, see. No matter how obsessed with cleanliness a human is, their senses only tell them so much, and to begin with washing doesn't really get blood off, it just lets you feel like it has."

"Uh, then you knew then?"

"Yes. But our goal was to activate the bomb."

"Man..."

"? Why are you hung up on the fake man from the parallel world?" Cars was lost.

I was glad Kawajiri Kosaku hadn't died. I was glad he'd kept his family from harm. That Kawajiri's suffering hadn't ended, and he'd had to go through that last hour again, but if we caught the

real Kira Yoshikage and made him lift Bites the Dust then history here would have an influence on that parallel world as well. And hopefully that would free that Kawajiri Kosaku.

So how could we find Kira Yoshikage? That hand fetishist... If Kawajiri Kosaku had been Kira Yoshikage he would have worried about his wife's hands, I thought. And Buccellati had told me what Kawajiri Shinobu did for a living.

An election official.

If she was a Japanese election official then had she worked in one of those election loudspeaker trucks? She was still young and attractive.

People in those trucks wore white gloves and waved out the windows. That would attract attention, and even with your hand out the window all day long you wouldn't get sunburned with gloves on. Kira Yoshikage would consider that a relief, I thought. Um? A job with lots of young, beautiful women wearing gloves... an election office. The Morioh Mayor's campaign.

Shishimaru Denta and Kumoi Takumi.

The current mayor, Shishimaru Denta, had a male secretary. But when Shishimaru stood with Buccellati at Budogaoka Academy, his face swollen, the secretary was nowhere to be found. I could say with confidence that no secretary would hand a politician over to the mob. Quite the opposite; secretaries would put themselves on the line for the politicians. There should have been a secretary standing with him, his face even more swollen, and he would take all questions for Shishimaru, and never let the man answer himself. So where had his secretary gone? I couldn't remember what the man looked like. He'd been so plain looking. Plain in a handsome way, but a man who's job appeared to be trying not to stand out.

I called Buccellati in Morioh from Funny's parallel world,

and quickly explained that Kawajiri Kosaku was a fake and we had to find Kira Yoshikage again, but Buccellati said, "Sure, but we're trapped in here and can't move."

"But there are still detectives in Morioh, right? Runbaba 12 and Daibakusho Curry. Have them look into it. They know what they're doing, right?" They might be a bit eccentric, but still. "So I have an idea, but first one question. The guy who died in Kira Yoshikage's place, Kawajiri Kosaku...he had a wife, Shinobu. She was an election official, right?"

"Mm? Yeah."

"Which side was she working for?"

"Shishimaru Denta."

"Do you know his secretary's name?"

"Hold on...yes, we do. Kunimido Chien."

Ah ha. "Then check him out."

Then I called Narancia and had him bring Penelope down here. "Sure, but you'd better not fucking scare her!" Narancia said. Apparently she'd won him over. When Penelope reached ground level she took one look at Cars and the Valentines and froze. Oops, guess that was a bit intimidating. "Penelope, over here!" I said, but she didn't budge. "No! I'm scared! How can you make a girl come to a place like this?" "A girl...how old are you again, Penelope?" "Don't ever ask a girl her age!" Yeah, yeah. But I needed her to do me a favor. "Just get out of there!" she said. I was talking to her with just my face poking out from between Funny's palms. I shook my head. "I gotta be in here or the phone won't work."

While I was explaining my idea to Penelope Buccellati called back. "We found him! You were right, Kunimido Chien is our man! The real Kira Yoshikage at last! He blew several detectives up. We also found a bachelor he was about to kill in the basement of that

man's home. He's on the brink of death, seems like he was badly tortured, but he's still alive. We're headed to join the chase now!"

"Hunh? You are? You can get out of Cube House now?"

"No! The Cube House itself is moving! Ha ha ha! The entire house is rolling like a die! It's crazy, but kinda awesome! I'll call you back."

I had Cars bring Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem down, and while he was doing that Buccellati called again. "Shit! Damn it! We caught Kunimido Chien but the man he was torturing...that sack of shit! It was Jorge Joestar! He fucked up his face and body and he's dead! He's fucking dead! God fucking dammit! We're gonna fucking kill Kunimido Chien!"

I took a deep breath.

"You can't. Absolutely do not kill Kunimido Chien. I need you to drop him and Antonio Torres through the hole in the Cube House."

"What!? You want us to let him escape through time!?"

"Don't worry. I think the Cube House's time travel device isn't for the person falling. If it was, Tsukumojuku wouldn't have died. Or 'Jorge Joestar'. Or Shiobana Haruno...Giorno Giovanna would have come back in one piece as well." That device took the person falling and sent them to help someone in the world. I was sure of it. And we needed him most of all right now. He would be most useful to us.

"....."

"Check with Sugimoto Reimi. Oh, and...Buccellati. I promise we'll cause Kunimido Chien more pain than a simple lynching ever could." I felt like I'd become a gangster myself.

But 'Jorge Joestar' was dead? What should I do with that information? Tell Penelope? Tell Elizabeth? Send word to Grandma

Erina? I had to do all of those things. But I couldn't now. Penelope would go out of her mind. She'd kill the shit out of Kunimido Chien. I mean, the lady had turned Antonio Torres into a giant wall covering all of England when she thought he'd killed Jorge. She thought he was still alive in the future for now, but I couldn't begin to predict what she'd do if she found out he'd died after all. At any rate, Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem made it safely through Antonio Torres' throat, was spat out into the sky above us, and then Cars guided it back down to our level just as Kunimido Chien and Antonio Torres appeared out of thin air next to the fountain.

I'd been considering punching him on sight, but clearly the gangsters hadn't been able to resist beating the shit out of him before they dropped Kunimido Chien/Kira Yoshikage through the hole to Piccadilly Circus. It looked like we wouldn't even need to have Cars use The World Ultimate to stop time.

He was a fastidious looking, handsome man. "Ever heard of Dio Brando?" I asked. If he hadn't, I couldn't see why a hand loving woman killing pervert would suddenly turn around and torture 'Jorge Joestar' to death.

"All I want," Kira said. "Is to live a quiet life. The only reason I ever set off these deafening bombs is so that I can have that quiet life. But what am I to do when people come after me that won't be silenced by a bomb or two? When someone shows up that I will never be able to get away from? I do what I must. Killing one man is a small price to pay. If I clean and wash and disinfect the dirt will come off."

Now what, I thought. But behind me Cars spoke, "You fool. Like I keep saying, the way you do things you'll never get rid of the blood or their bodily fluids. Humans aren't nearly sensitive enough to blood. That's why you're so weak. You don't even know this is here, do you?" Cars reached out his hand, touched the tip just to just below Kira Yoshikage's lips, just above the chin. He showed his

finger tip to Kira Yoshikage, but there was nothing we could see on it. "Even this trace amount of blood harbors life. Especially if the owner wants to haunt you, and is desperate to live. Have you ever seen the shape of life? No matter how much water you use, you can never wash the blood away." Some round, transparent thing swelled up from Cars' fingertip, and soon became the head of a young woman, dangling upside-down from his finger, staring at Kira Yoshikage. Not glaring, no sign of rage...just staring. "You kill with sudden explosions so she doesn't know she's dead or how," Cars said. "They're all like that. They've got so little blood left they can't do anything to you, but they're all watching you."

The woman's head dangling from his finger, Cars reached out and touched Kira Yoshikage. The head attached itself to Kira's abdomen, and around it more bubbles formed, and as they grew more formed around them. "Ah...augh...aughhhhh!" Kira Yoshikage shrieked, and tried to shake and brush the heads off him, but they just kept increasing in number. Since the heads were transparent I could still make him out at first, but soon there were so many they completely buried him. Kira Yoshikage had turned into a writhing pile of human heads. "Auuuuuughhhh! Auuuuuuuuughhhhhh!" All we could hear was the screams coming from inside. In time, they grew fainter, and stopped.

"Make sure he doesn't die of shock," I said.

"Heh heh heh, you are no judge of human limits. Human bodies are weak, but their minds are strong. Look at these dead women. Traces of blood far less than a drop still harbor this much life."

"Yeah. But I just feel sorry for them. I can't watch this."

"I see."

Cars reached out his hand, touched the side of the 5m long human head grapevine, and the women's heads shrank and were gone. Kira Yoshikage came back into view. I stepped closer to check

on him, and his eyes were hollow, and he was muttering under his breath, and for a moment I was glad to see him still alive and then I heard what he was saying.

"Filth. Filth. Gotta throw these clothes away. Got to always wear new clothes, never old ones. Filth. My nails must be filthy. Got to throw them out. There must be stuff left under my nails from when I touched the girls. Filth. Filthy nails. Gotta peel them off. Peel off all my nails. Grow new nails. Oh, my skin's filthy, too. My skin is filthy. Can't bear it. Gotta take it off. Take my skin and these clothes off. Peel it off. Peel my skin and my nails off. Grow new skin."

Grow new skin.

Like Antonio Torres?

Would Kira Yoshikage end up like him, able to replace his skin and nails at incredible speeds? Peel them off whenever? I shuddered, but this was entirely possible.

Wounds. Perhaps human minds were as strong as Cars said.

I had to settle this before he gained a new power from the suffering he'd just endured.

"Cars, let's go."

"Yes."

I spoke to Kira. "Good and evil, divine and demonic, right and wrong...I have always believed there are shades of gray to all things, and I think I'm right about that. Even you...are not entirely evil. You see, you're going to do something for us that only you can do, and that will save the world. Be that as it may, I believe this world is mostly good, and will continue to condemn evil as I see it. Because this world's scale leans safely on the side of good, people like me can go around saying shit like, 'There is no absolute good or evil' and sound reasonable. So I'm grateful to you. Thank you for

saving the world, Kira Yoshikage. Good-bye."

Cars crouched down next to Kira. "From here is our little rendezvous. We'll be together for all of this."

But rather than help Kira Yoshikage up, Cars pulled Killer Queen out of him. It was a humanoid Stand with a smooth, cat-like face. It took a swing at Cars, but he didn't care. "Go ahead and give it a try."

Killer Queen blew Cars up.

"Wait...too close!" Kira said, but Killer Queen pressed the switch anyway. Boom! Cars swelled up a bit and flames erupted from cracks in his skin, but they died as soon as they began and he was back to normal. Killer Queen's face was devoid of expression, but it had clearly not expected that.

"Keep going until you get it," Cars said, and Killer Queen hit the switch again, and again, and was clearly making the bombs bigger each time trying to blow Cars up, but boom, bang, ka-boom, all the explosions were contained entirely inside Cars. He just let a little flame or backdraft out and was fine. At last he said, "Get it now?" and the explosions stopped.

"Unh...what are you doing, Killer Queen!? Kill him!" Kira snarled.

"The fact that you still haven't given up is the difference between your life and your ability. The answer to that equation is the hopeless situation you find yourself in, and the pathetic line you just uttered. Hmph. You wish your Stand to solve everything for you while you lie there and take it easy?"

"N...no, I...!"

"I wouldn't even qualify that as trying to live. You're just being lazy, and pushing your problems onto others. A quiet life? If by any chance you manage to achieve that for a single moment it won't be because of anything you did. It will be purely because of the talent you were born with, that you happened to ride out. You

yourself and your talent are separate things, understand? You are but a fool trying to take the easy way out."

"...unh...!"

"Heh, all you can do is grunt? And even that is because you persist in trying to protect your tedious pride. Even though you long since gave up on trying to protect your talent. Heh heh heh. I see right through you. Deep down in your heart, you're envious of that talent. You're annoyed it exists. You want to believe you're this amazing person, but what actually gets results is the one standing next to you. This is the inherent sin of all Stands. They take human forms, stand right beside you, and prove that your personality and talent are unrelated."

".....!"

Having brow-beaten Kira into silence, Cars turned back to Killer Queen. "It seems your Master's vanity had left him immobile. So let me ask you. Set one of those bombs that turn back time on your Master."

Killer Queen stared at Cars, and then went back inside Kira.

"Stop...! How can you listen to him...!" Kira said, but Killer Queen ignored him, vanishing from view.

"You are now a bomb," Cars said. He picked Kira up. "Come, Stand Master. Once again, you survive...all because your talent is distinct from you. Pampered humans are but so much baggage."

The abuse had Kira shaking, tears in his eyes, but Cars just grabbed him bodily, sprouted wings, and took off towards the sky. He was beautiful. If only I had wings! I thought, but they wouldn't look half as good on me, so I figured I was better off without.

As Cars wheeled above us, Funny Valentine called up to him. "Wait, Cars! Let me do what I can to ease your burden! Such as it is."

"Speak," Cars said.

"We know the approximate date that the pieces of the holy

man were gathered and hidden in Trinity Church. This occurred in the second universe – in other words, thirty-five universes ago – on January 19th, 1891, at 4:30 PM. Right after the finish for the first ever Steel Ball Run!"

"....."

"That's one less universe you have to turn back, and that much less time you have to search through!"

"...ha ha ha! I spent thousands of years in Europe, but your American jokes aren't half bad, either!"

"Heh heh."

"I thank you then, Funny Valentine. If you want off the ship, do so now."

And with that Cars, flew higher, and with Killer Queen by his side, flew through Antonio Torres' half-dead mouth, and out of the rhinoceros beetle's armor.

"So the world is going to be saved by a serial killer and the ultimate being," Elizabeth said, coming up next to me. "But he'd better hurry. Antonio Torres will die any moment."

"Yes. But he'll be in time." I had faith in Beyond, and we had Penelope and the original Antonio Torres here, as well as Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem. I'd asked Penelope to make repairs to Antonio Torres. We'd put Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem in Antonio Torres, speeding his time up so he was spitting out a ton of new Antonio Torres, which were inhaled into the dying one. The new ones would eventually die with him, but this would prolong that. Penelope was not a fan of this gruesome task, and I'd had to work pretty hard to persuade her. She didn't really seem to get the purpose of it, but had eventually bought into my desperation. "Ha ha. It'll all be fine."

"You know," Elizabeth said. "Your face and personality are nothing like him, but somehow you remind me of my Jorge. You're a lot alike."

"Thank you?"

"Heh heh heh. My Jorge would have said the exact same thing in that exact same tone of voice."

I wondered if I should tell her that 'Jorge Joestar' was dead. She still believed he was alive.

But I didn't want to upset her now. Although that might not be best for her in the long run.

"Oh, looks like they've started," Elizabeth said, eyes on the sky. I looked up. Outside Great Britain, time was going backwards an hour at a time. Pop. Popop. Popopopopopop. The speed quickly grew faster, and smoother. The moon and sun rose backwards across the sky, and fell. The speed grew even faster. Which meant Cars was making Kira's Bites the Dust blow him up more often. And each explosion took him back an hour, and Cars was planning on doing this until he went back thirty-five universes from now. Once the repairs to the armor Penelope was making were good enough we could put Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem in Cars and make that hour shorter...but that would only shrink his perception of the explosion, not the number of explosions needed. And Cars had agreed to do that all himself.

For who?

Cars didn't actually have a reason to do this. This thought almost made me cry. That man was sacrificing so much.

"What?" Elizabeth said.

I wiped my tears. "This adventure's almost over."

The helicopter with The Funniest aboard rushed through Antonio's mouth, out of the armor, waved at Cars, and flew off, headed to somewhere in America.

Trinity Church was located at 79 Broadway, New York, with an entrance on Wall Street. It was built in 1696, and rebuilt in the

current gothic style in 1846.

Funny Valentine led us to the secret underground facility beneath it. NYPD Blue accompanied us. As Great Britain went back in time, Morioh got its legs under it and turned back over, and the phones started working again, but when I explained my plan over the pebble phone NYPD Blue insisted that Manhattan Island was his territory and dragged Nijimura Fukashigi here through the hole in the Cube House. So he could make himself useful.

From the road nearby we could hear cheers and people calling "President Valentine". The sky above lower Manhattan was filled with confetti, drifting down on us. Until a moment ago we'd heard loud booming noises, but that was Cars, above us, enjoying Killer Queen Bites the Dust's explosions. He'd released the power now.

With real fireworks going off instead, we passed through the back gate, went around the back of the cemetery, and into a shelter disguised as a crypt. The door was already open, and there was a girl sitting on the floor inside, trembling and crying. There was a headless corpse at her feet. The corpse was dressed like a jockey, in riding boots. This was this universe's Dio Brando. I had no idea how he'd ended up like this.

And on the corpse's back was the Dio Brando who'd been born in the first universe, become a vampire, become an ultimate being thirty-six universes later, had his body broken to pieces and then gone forward two more universes as just a head looking for a new body.

There was a table behind Dio and the girl, and a different, mummified corpse lying on it. This corpse had holes in its hands and feet, and on its head you could just barely see the crown of thrones. The body of the holy man, the secret purpose of the Steel Ball Run. All brought together here; all that remained was to close the door. It had all just begun.

"Heh heh heh...I thank you, Lucy Steel!" Dio said. "Because your womb held the head of the holy man I was able to reach this spot without anyone suspecting the truth, and now I can reclaim my body!"

I didn't know what he meant by all of that, but the situation was clear enough. Except for the head, eight of the nine body parts were 'Ultimate Being' Dio's body. That was fine. From what he'd just said, a head belonging to no holy man was here, too, but that was likely a miracle. One brought about not by Dio, but by the man who stood behind him, the long-haired, wounded man with the crown of thorns.

From the cut on Dio's head, tubes emerged...blood vessels, I assumed. They writhed like he was a jellyfish or octopus, pulling him across the table towards the body. "When I get my body back, Dio's eternal rule will begin! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

And now it was our turn. "You never did know how to treat girls, Dio," Erina Joestar said, stepping out of the shadows. "'My body, my body'. When are you going to accept the facts and learn some self-control?" Penelope was by her side; she'd gone to fetch Erina from Wastewood. I'd loaned the Das Boot disc in my head to her to make the trip, and it was back in my head now. Erina went on, "Can you still say that with me here, Dio Brando?"

"How...?" Dio was momentarily surprised by her arrival, but soon got his smirk back. "It has been a while, Erina Pendleton. This does bring back memories...of our time together on that box raft."

Erina smiled. "Not memories I think of fondly. I doubt you enjoy remembering those events either."

"Why wouldn't I? Heh heh heh. Did you truly believe you defeated me then? Your spirit was indeed impressive! The way you cut your own throat! But no, you did not escape me that day. I let you go, certain that the final victory would belong to Dio! Because I needed you to continue the Joestar bloodline!"

"So? You planned to be a parasite on my son and grandson, purely to fulfill your own desires? Such a shallow way of thinking, and yet you actually have the nerve to brag about it. Even your father had the sense to behave himself in front of my father-in-law."

".....! Don't you dare mention him!"

"You still fly into a rage at the thought of him? All this time and you're still trapped by your parent's curse. You've lived more than long enough to grow up, but you refuse to take responsibility for anything. If you had the time to steal glimpses of my heir's lives, you should have spent some time reflecting on your own life."

"I have no need of your tedious sermons! Be silent, Erina Joestar! When I get my body back, I'll kill you first! You've already had your child! It's time for you to make your exit!"

Time for our next guest. "That child would be my husband," Elizabeth Joestar said, stepping out of the darkness. At her bosom was a baby; Joseph Joestar, only a few months old. "And now that I've had a child of my own, is it time for me to make my exit, too?"

Dio could not conceal his surprise. It had been my idea to bring Joseph along.

He was not in any danger.

"How...are you mad!? Why would you bring a baby here!?" Dio roared, so confused he actually spoke sense.

"Heh heh heh, don't worry," Elizabeth said. "This place is rather dingy, but it will hold a special place in the heart of every Joestar."

"Whaaaat....!?"

And at last it was my turn.

"One important person is still missing," Erina said.

Elizabeth called my name. "Jorge, come out!"

I leapt forward. "Hey hey hey!" I yelled.

Dio Brando's jaw dropped.

This was working.

The key to our strategy was catching Dio off guard.

With The Passion, Dio could read most events. But when I intervened, the future changed.

And according to Cars, the point at which Dio had left Made in Heaven Ultimate Requiem was one universe before this one, the first of the thirty-seven universes, one morning in Egypt in 1987, right after the vampire double he'd prepared had fought Joseph Joestar and his grandson, Kujo Jotaro, and died. Having faked his death as a vampire, he recovered his Stand. Dio Brando could read the future with The Passion and use The World Ultimate to stop time so he was at peak power. And as someone not related to him by blood, it was critical that I upend expectations in every way I could think of.

At the top of my lungs, I yelled, "Welcome to the Joestar family reunion! I'm Jorge Joestar, and I'll be your host today."

"Jorge Joestar?" Dio said. "No...how?" I imagined he was asking how that could be my name when I was clearly Japanese, or perhaps more specifically he was questioning the fact that Jonda Joestar had not children, but Elizabeth said, "Surprise? You had the mafia boss take him from Cube House and you turned him into a vampire double and then had his son and great-grandson kill him, or at least his body, so how is he here?"

Elizabeth's ad-libbed deductions caught me off guard. Yeah, that was a simpler explanation, I thought. Far simpler than using a secret child who was secretly helping him. Having Elizabeth totally nail his original plan seemed to stun Dio to silence.

Now, I thought, and turned it up a notch. "Well, there's a bit of tension in the room so I'd say it's time for me to perform a special party trick! With mah belly ♡!" And I yanked my shirt up, exposing my belly.

Cars was hiding in my bellybutton, and he jumped out. I still couldn't believe it had occurred to me to ask Cars to do this, and when Cars had simply agreed to it without a second's thought I'd panicked slightly.

I even had him say, "Boo!", making for the least Cars-like thing he'd ever said, and quite frankly I'm not entirely sure he had any understanding of quite how goofy this all was, but in mid-air he got back in character. "If the world is a loop, you can never get away, Dio Brando. Are you ready to savor despair?" Yikes, saying shit that might make Dio calm down a little, but we didn't have time for me to point that out and I didn't have the nerve in the first place.

Not a problem. I just kept going. "A big round of applause for our special guest, Cars! And you know what that means! Cars' special self-made ladder! It's the Ultimate! You'll never forget it!"

From inside my stomach, Funny Valentine produced seven parallel world 'Cars' and flung them up towards where Cars was floating. Each had a Cars version of The World Ultimate, and could stop time, so a latter of eight 'Cars' stretched from my stomach towards the body of the 'holy man' but even when they touched their bodies weren't destroyed. Dio was so flabbergasted he forgot to put his own Stand out. Instead, he sputtered, "Wh-what!? What are you doing!?"

"And time resumes," Cars said, and at this signal I started running up the Cars ladder.

Beneath my legs the 'Cars' were knocked into each other, turned into Menger Sponges, fell apart, and vanished. Bam bam bam bam bam! When my run finished, Dio's attention was entirely

on their destruction. As the seven 'Cars' crumbled, they got a bit close to the eighth Cars, and when he noticed, he kicked the wall to put some distance between them. When he did, for an instant I was exposed.

I'd been waiting for that moment.

I'd thought of all kinds of things to say, but what actually popped out in that moment?

"Dipshit! You're a disgrace to everyone adopted! You should never have fucked with us!"

I have no idea what I meant by that last bit but I said what I said and had to live with it. Like, I hated that this made it sound like what he'd done for the reputation of adopted kids was what bothered me about him but too late now. As long as I could get that shocked look on his face.

Before he recovered from any of these surprises, I landed on the table where the body was placed. Right next to the corpse. And the table itself was about the same size as the thing that goes in the oven during cremations. "Wh-what are you doing!? Stop!" Dio yelled, but Funny handed me a hatchet and I used it to chop the holy man's head clean off.

"Namu-amida-butsu!"

Thwack!

This wasn't anyone's head. It was just a supplemental one, created by a miracle. I got it off in one hit, tossed the hatchet away, and grabbed another head that Funny passed out of my stomach. The head Erina Joestar had kept safe all these years, the head of her husband.

The start of all of this.

Jonathan Joestar's head.

At last Dio realized what I was doing. He screamed. "No, no! Stoooooop! That's my bodyyyyy! I trained it, I made it the ultimate being! It's mine! Noooooooooooooooooo!"

I ignored him, and put Jonathan Joestar's head right on the fresh cut stump of the mummified 'holy man'. Jonathan Joestar's head looked even fresher, and it matched the cut perfectly. This was the place where it belonged, and now it was back. Human bodies had such strong identities, I thought; all of this was only possible because me and the other 'Jorge Joestar' and Dio all had Beyonds, but those three Beyonds were actually one. The Trinity.

I turned around and looked right past Dio's severed head at the face of his Beyond. It looked a lot like him. Sad, kind eyes. Dio's Beyond knew this was all over. With a smile, it faded out, and was gone. "Hey, Jorge Joestar! Look!" Funny said, his head peering out of my belly. I turned to see Jonathan Joestar's head fully connected to his body, his eyes open, a light back in them. Blood pumping back into his head; I could see the life coming back to him. His skin went from being like dried papier-mâché to a healthy gleam. To be honest this was all kind of gross. "Good, it worked!" I said, backing away. Nobody would mistake this body for a corpse now. I hopped down off the table, and he groaned and sat up. Realizing he was naked, Erina took off her shawl, and wrapped it around his waist. He groaned again, and brushed his hair back out of his eyes. For a moment I could see the crown of thorns; the same one Dio Brando had had. The Passion.

"Heh heh heh!"

The man on the table suddenly began laughing, and we all caught our breaths.

"Jonathan?" Erina said, worried.

Since I'd met her, there'd been a hint of desperation to her every expression, but her smile now was bright, open, and totally gorgeous. Tch. ← Mm?

"I'm back, Erina," the half-naked man said.

"Welcome back, Jonathan," Erina said, tears flooding down her face.

"Sorry I kept you waiting. Thanks for looking after things."

"No, no...But...but I'm sorry. Jorge...Jorge is...!"

Erina could barely get the words out, and Elizabeth's smile faded, but Jonathan looked confused.

"Jorge? Isn't that Jorge there?" he said, looking at me.

"He's the future Jorge Joestar, Jonathan." Erina said. I felt super guilty suddenly.

"Um..."

"No, inside him!"

Jonathan had it figured out.

"Um, well...sorry!" I said, and dropped to my hands and knees for a very Japanese apology that would almost certainly be completely lost on everyone here.

Just as I did this...

"Tah-dahhh!"

'Jorge Joestar' leapt out of the parallel world inside me and banged his head on the concrete, and because of my posture no one but me could even see him.

With my hands and knees on the ground and his head stuck out between my arms I started arguing with 'Jorge'. "Ow! What the heck are you doing!?" "Uh, you know, things got awkward and..." "Don't worry, we go big enough it'll be fine!" "I super promise you that isn't true." "Just stand the fuck up! Seriously, what are you even doing?" "Shut up." "Oh, wait, I know this! Tsukumojuku told me about it!" ".....!" "The Japanese *dogeza*! Pfft ha ha ha! That's how you show total submission to someone Japanese, right?" "I

said, shut up!" Before we could bicker further, pssst! Electricity crackled across the floor. "Auughhh!" I said, and the other 'Jorge' yelped too, and my body stood up on its own and I couldn't move.

Elizabeth was standing in front of us, Joseph in her arms, giving us the devil's own glare and I had to concentrate very hard to not piss myself and in my belly Jorge went, "Arrghrghrghrghrgh woah woah woah woah woah I I I'm gonna I'm gonna piss myself oh shit I did sorry!"

No! Not inside me!? But I guess that parallel world wasn't actually inside me but still! Gross!

"Jorge?" she said, very calmly.

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"Um, well..."

"Get out."

"Um, sure. But..."

"What?"

"Kira Yoshikage tortured me pretty bad so everything's a bit scary right now..."

"....."

"So I thought I'd make a nice happy fresh start but, uh...it didn't really work out like I planned."

That was the point I'd been trying to make. We'd figured it would be a fun surprise and had thoroughly enjoyed planning it but in the heat of the actual moment...well, people picked up on our nervousness and the mood went south and nothing really worked out.

But then Elizabeth said, "You're a clumsy, fretful, awkward man so it can't possibly be that bad. You've always been like this."

'Jorge' looked up. "Lisa Lisa..."

Elizabeth smiled. "Now, Jorge. Come on out of there."

"OK!♥"

'Jorge' scrambled out of me, and Elizabeth knelt down next to him. "You're an idiot, Jorge! Don't you ever dare die again, for real or not!" she said, tears in her eyes. She gave him a kiss, and that pssst happened again like he was struck by lightning.

"Argghrghrgghrghh!" 'Jorge' said, convulsing. I was freaking out behind him. "H-Hey, be gentle!"

After all 'Jorge' had literally been dead when they'd found him in Kunimido Chien's house in Morioh. But he'd come back to life after they brought him back to the Cube House and Sugimoto Reimi had started crying and shaking his body. Two full hours after death, a completely impossible turn of events, but Reimi said she'd seen a half-translucent 'Jorge' flying inside her and I believed her. Somewhere somehow 'Jorge' had learned how to remove his soul, and when Kira Yoshikage got him, he'd separated it from his body and come back once the torture was over. Because he wasn't big on pain.

When the kiss was over Elizabeth realized 'Jorge' was about to pass out and panicked. "Hunh? What!? Sorry, Jorge, did I use Hamon? I really didn't mean to, honest! It's just been so long! I forgot!" In her arms, Joseph was laughing happily.

"Leave him be, Lisa Lisa," Jonathan said. "He's a man, he'll be fine. Ah ha ha ha! That was some fantastic Hamon, though!"

Elizabeth smiled, too. "Thank you. But I've still got a lot to learn. According to Master Tom Petty, anyway..." The Joestars all started talking at once, and I realized 'Jorge' had woken up again but missed his chance to speak.

Our eyes met. 'Jorge' gave me a faint smile, like, 'Families, eh?' so I sent him a message back. 'Yeah, but they're yours.'

Well, maybe that didn't come across in a glance but Jorge winked back at me. Winked!? What was that supposed to mean! I thought about it for a second and then gave up. He wasn't exactly someone who put meaning in every action to begin with, I mean,

look at the timing he chose to come bounding out of me, so odds were he didn't mean anything in particular by it. Maybe that's why he was so popular with the ladies.

The place still smelled like blood despite the merriment, but Erina noticed Lucy Steel staring at them. "Your nightmare's over," she said. "I'm sure this can't have been easy for you, but..."

"Erina Pendleton?" Lucy said, interrupting.

"Yes. That's my maiden name."

"Mine, too. I was Lucy Pendleton. Now I'm Lucy Steel."

"My."

"Um...I'm married to someone else, but...it's important to keep the faith, isn't it?"

Erina smiled, and nodded. "Keeping the faith is the only way to deepen love, to add richness to it, and to turn love into strength."

"Good."

"I'm glad we could meet, Lucy Steel."

"Me too, Erina Joestar," Lucy replied. Tears ran down her cheeks, but even Lucy didn't seem to know why.

Erina smiled gently at her, and then Jonathan and Jorge and Elizabeth and Joseph all came in for a group hug.

It was time I went back to my own family.

I looked at Cars, and chuckled at how bored he looked. Oh!
♡♡♡ of course he did! Perfect.

I left the Joestar family to it and went upstairs. Penelope came with me. Hunh? I thought, and glanced at her.

"I mean, I live with them and I'm like family but big changes are in store for the Joestars now, so I've gotta change too. It's time I left the nest."

"It is?"

"Yes. So...what's everyone else doing?"

"I wanna go back to Morioh!" Nijimura Fukashigi said. He'd been hiding behind a grave. "Look, that dude who came running out looked scary."

Nothing good ever came of running into Dio Brando. For sure.

"Whaaaaat!?! But I live here!" NYPD Blue yelled. He started begging Fukashigi to stay longer, but got talked down. "OK, OK, OK. I promise I'll apply to a college here. I've never been away from Muryotaisu and I'm scared of the whole thing but...it'll be easier than any of this mess was, and being on my own in a city like this could be kinda fun."

College?

Funny Valentine went back to his own universe.

"I wanted to uncover the secret to America's prosperity. And I wanted to protect that secret. And if I'm totally honest I sort of wanted to be that secret. But I've learned my lesson. What makes America great is the people who live in it, not anyone lying underground or in the heavens above. And that lesson will be my treasure."

I hope he becomes a great President. One who spreads joy and peace to the world, and reduces pain and suffering.

Penelope was interested in Japan.

"I mean, my Stand is in Nishi Akatsuki, right? I should go see it!"

? Wasn't this the result before the cause? Nah, I wasn't gonna argue it. Come!

"And I only ever made it to London! I want an adventure!

They're a lot harder to start on your own than you'd think."

Well, that's what she said at the time but once we got to Nishi Akatsuki rather a lot happened and even more crazy stuff happened and then two years later she married my father, Jonda, and became Penelope Joestar, her registration going from Spain to England to Japan. What the heck.

A year later they had a kid. A girl! I was totally mad for my new sister.

But they named her Joeko Joestar.

I mean, if you've got no ear for it at all don't try and give us Japanese-esque names! If we're gonna be Japanese, we should really give up the whole Jojo yoke.

Cars used the exhausted Kira Yoshikage he'd hidden inside himself to take everyone back to their own universe, and once we were all back he disappeared, but whenever I met up with people from Morioh or Nero Nero Island we'd talk about how crazy he was and wonder what he was up to.

I didn't know. I didn't need to know.

I was sort of scared to know.

Anyway, I kept doing my detective thing in Nishi Akatsuki and finally turned twenty and could change my name. Of course, I went with Jorge Joestar for the English spelling.

The Japanese name was a little trickier. I'd tried all sorts of kanji for it but when I actually tried writing them out they all were a little bit wrong. And then I happened to talk to 'Jorge' for the first time in a while.

At this point he and his wife were separated. Apparently almost losing him had made Elizabeth afraid of losing him and

she'd been reluctant to get back together again...officially. I was pretty sure she was just off on some big adventure with Joseph that she wasn't telling Jorge about. Since he was legally dead in England, he went to America and started working as a screenwriter in Hollywood under the pen name Motorize Jump, waiting for her to come back to him. I think he was rather an idiot but oh well.

Anyway, while 'Jorge' was complaining endlessly about Tom Petty's prophecy and what it had done to him and Lisa Lisa, I began to wonder.

Maybe I should ask Tom Petty about my name.

So I picked up the pebble and called across space time and the result made me think I'd been an idiot to ask anyone from a country without kanji but then I looked at it again and sort of liked it which was bad.

It was just super weird from a Japanese perspective.

So why did it feel right?

Maybe Jonda and I were family after all. Wasn't sure if that made me happy or sad.

I mean, Joestar was always just Jo-suta- in katakana, but using 'castle' and 'character' for Joji was just madness!

城字ジョースター