An Approach of Carrot and Stick
by j7i

Summary

Against hatred, love is a smear of delusions and dizzying insecurities. Against Dio, there is nothing for Jonathan to do.

A Phantom Blood rewrite featuring none of the characters or relationships or mechanics you know and love.

Notes

Translation into Русский available: Метод кнута и пряника (An Approach of Carrot and Stick) by enigmaz

This story is a different beast from Maybe. There is neither mystery nor adventure to be had and the interactions between Dio and Jonathan are the driving force. The slow burn in this is real and most of the fic deserves its mature rating for violence and themes, not sex.

Parts two and three feature characters from other series:
(II) Adrift in the Pacific (Deux ans vacances), Savage Garden, Lord of the Flies, Under the Rose, Tom Brown's School Days
(III) Various minor historical personnages. Names and birthdays (but not personalities) are taken from real people.

The smut in parts four and five feature the following kinks:
(IV) Psychedelic drug (ab)use, dubcon bordering noncon, coercion bordering classical conditioning, bondage,
gagging, handjobs

(V) Extended refractory period, clothed getting off, switching, edging, blowjobs, progression, deepthroating, coitus interruptus, intercrural sex, prostitution, nonconsensual m/m/f, cuckholding, erectile dysfunction, horseplay, dirty talk, bondage, exhibitionism

Part five features the following canon characters:
REO Speedwagon, Wang Chan, Jack the Ripper, Will Zepelli, Lisa Lisa, George II
Goodbye, Mr. and Mrs. Brando

The Viscount and Viscountess of the House Joestar are blessed with two children born within three years of each other. The elder, a son, is born to the title of Baron. The younger, a daughter, is born from the lifeblood of her mother. She is a sickly child, and a girl at that, and though the Viscount does not leave her to the elements, he considers estate finances to hold priority. With the death of the Viscountess comes an influx of maids and so it is through them that the girl is raised.

Although both children take after their father in looks, the girl's personality is certainly reminiscent of the deceased Viscountess. As the years go by and his son is sent to boarding school, as was fashionable, the Viscount begins to spend more and more time with his daughter. She is a clever girl, he discovers, having already memorized the letters of the alphabet, and after a couple months under his tutelage, she can read the Holy Bible from cover to cover.

Like his dead wife, she has the voice of a songbird and the heart of a rabbit.

In a moment of paternal affection, he offers her a share of his estate. She declines, having no stomach for the upkeep of an estate, and he gifts her with an allowance instead. He is immensely pleased when she uses this pocket change to acquire a library, and when her older brother returns from his studies, the three of them spend many a happy evening reading aloud from the newly-bound volumes.

The Viscount is struck with an incurable illness of the mind however, and in a rare moment of clarity, he begs his son to marry soon, to perpetuate the estate and their name. He has an obedient son; the young man hurries to the home of his childhood sweetheart, immediately asking her father for her hand in marriage, and arrives back in his own estate hours after his father's passing.

It is the daughter, then, who stays by her father's side. She weeps, weeps for the man who cursed her birth and ignored her infantile cries, because he is the same man who gave her life and, in teaching her how to read, allowed her to live. She cries when the priest gives the last rites and continues to cry when her brother returns, fiancée in-tow. The funeral is held, her father's will is read, and her brother inherits the title of Viscount and the Joestar estate without a problem. The wedding takes place three months later and it is an auspicious occasion. Her other brother is the happiest she's seen him and when her sister-in-law tosses the bouquet, it sails to where she is standing, petals fluttering over her hands.

In between the hecticness that comes at the start of every marriage and the handful of loose ends in business their father had left behind, she spends weeks not seeing her brother outside of suppertime.

Brother, she forgets to ask, and what of a match for me?

Months later, when the finances are settled and the estate is in even more solid condition, her sister-in-law confides her fears of infertility. They have been married for two-thirds of a year and despite constant congress, her flowers continue to show. She reassures her sister-in-law then, that her brother is clearly in love with her and that children would come naturally, with time. The other woman dries her tears and declares it high time that they baked something together.

It is a combination of being a third wheel to her brother and his wife and being able to read the heart-wrenching romances which were so plentiful that makes her own heart ache.

Her depression is cured by a chance visit to the city market and the subsequent affections of an
innkeeper's son. He is a homely man, her sister-in-law will say, but only ever that and no more. He has no titles and very little money and cannot read nor write. But he brings her flowers and makes the arduous journey to the Joestar mansion -- twice! -- and she finds herself charmed by his urban manners. After he has kissed her cheek, this man five years older than her brother, he says he shall ask for her hand in marriage.

Her brother takes her aside then, kissing her hands and congratulating her happiness. He says that times are changing, that titles are becoming less important. Why, just the other day, he had struck a business venture with a man without rank who owned half the southern ports of England. What is important, he adds, is the character of the soul. She hugs him then, her wonderful starry-eyed older brother, and he sends her off with tears in his eyes.

The first year of her marriage is like a dream come true. Her husband is sweet and kind; he kisses her cheek and brings her flowers every weekend. More than the affection, she is grateful for the companionship -- so grateful, in fact, that she offers to teach him how to read. He takes her up on the offer, but she then feels ill-at-ease, and they discover she is pregnant days after. Giddily, she writes back to her brother, and his reply comes in a couple months. It is a truly joyous occasion: his own wife, the Viscountess, is with child as well. In a daze, she thinks of their children, of being both mother and aunt.

The business at the inn takes a turn for the worse however, and with its demise sinks her happy marriage. Her husband takes to coming home later and later. He is looking for more work, she tells herself, rubbing her swollen stomach.

When she goes into labor, her husband is nowhere to be found. She must call for the midwife herself, using her final scrap of allowance as payment before passing out from the contractions. When she comes to, a baby boy with the eyes and hair of her own mother is bawling before her. The midwife congratulates her on a successful delivery, and she feels a happiness she's never known possible. She is a mother now, she thinks, and with the title comes a new tomorrow.

To recall a decade's worth of all hope being crushed is too much. But even when she tries to put them out of her mind, they rise repeatedly, her private demons. How her husband refused to meet with her brother. How he ripped up all subsequent communication. How they were eventually sent into the slums because they were unable to make rent. She remembers clutching her son to her chest, feebly shielding him from his father's drunken blows. She remembers her precious library, the most important part of her trousseau, disappearing overnight. She remembers begging her husband to save his earnings, first for better accommodation and then for their son's education. She remembers losing her second child to another violent session. But mostly, she remembers her own inaction. The fall from grace is so swift and sudden, at times it is like a bad dream. It is as if she blinked once and now finds herself without a penny to her name, able to read but without any books, and concerning herself exclusively with her son's wellbeing.

Long after she has given up seeing her brother again, her son falls ill. He is feverish, delirious, unable to drink or walk, and all her husband can say -- in those fleeting moments he was home -- is good, the brat was taking up too much money. She nearly hits him, then.

Nearly.

She sells herself instead and manages to make enough to afford a doctor's visit.

Her son's recovery is not without its price. Her act of desperate infidelity makes itself known in the form of a visible veneral disease, and her husband beats her unconscious in his rage. Her final days are spent reading to her son.
"I'm sorry," she rasps. Her vision is blurring. Blindly, she reaches out. Her son catches her hand and presses it to his wet face.

"I'm sorry I couldn't provide a better life for you."

When his father's fingers stop twitching, Dio carefully sets aside his stolen book, walking over to the only bed and putting his fingers underneath the old man's jaw. Although it repulses him to touch his mother's murderer, he knows it is necessary. So he closes his eyes and carefully counts the time. After five minutes have passed and there is still no sign of a pulse, he removes his hand and takes a deep, steadying breath.

In the last throes of consciousness, Dario Brando had been babbling about an inheritance. Dio glances about the rundown shack that had been 'home' for all of his life and laughs. He would probably be thrown out into the streets the next morning, unable to sign a lease much less make rent. It is small consolation, knowing that his father's corpse will likely be dumped into the Thames, but a consolation nonetheless.

He paces the thirty-five steps that make up the perimeter of the room.

Finally, he sits himself down and opens his book back up again. It is a grammar guide to the English language, and an outdated edition at that, but his thirst for words knows no bounds. He spends the night flicking his gaze from the pages to his father's corpse. Although it is ridiculous, he finds himself keeping vigil, just in case. In case of what, he does not know (or rather, refuses to contemplate).

He greets the new day with dull eyes and heavy limbs -- yet his mind is blazing with excitement.

This is what he has been waiting for, he realizes. With his father dead, his life is finally his own to make.

His epiphany is interrupted by a knock on the door. He curses, quickly throwing three books and all the leftover spare change and food into a rucksack before crawling out the window. His initial plan had been to sneak past the nosy landlord. He is stopped in his tracks by a towering man -- undoubtedly a noble -- hunched over the shared accommodation's front door. Dio looks to the main road and sees a horse-drawn carriage and driver waiting -- waiting for the nobleman, no doubt. His upper lip curls. It is the only characteristic he will admit to sharing with his father, this deep-seated hatred for the monied elite.

As he makes his way to the main road, he wonders vaguely what someone of wealth would be doing in the slums. Perhaps he was looking for a fuck? Although it was only early morning, who knew what perversions the nobility were capable of? In his musings, he fails to avoid the driver's gaze.

"Lord Joestar!" the pot-bellied man calls, "Lord Joestar, is this him?"

Like a spooked deer, Dio freezes on the spot. Though his limbs refuse to move, his mind is racing: the driver could only have been referring to him; what would a nobleman want with him; unless he was a well-dressed police officer and he was planning on --
Right as he's about to make a break for it, the nobleman leaps down from the front entrance. He lands in front of Dio, on his feet, albeit it in a crouch, and when Dio tries to bypass him, the nobleman extends his arm, neatly blocking Dio's path.

"Excuse me," he says, rising to his full height, "But are you Dio Brando?"

"What's it to you?" Dio spits.

And then the nobleman is on his knees and in tears, blubbering about how he had forced open the door and seen Dario Brando's dead body and how sorry he was for not coming sooner.

Dio shoves the man away, snarling.

"Who are you?" he demands, "And what do you want with me?"

"My name is George Joestar," the Viscount says, taking off his hat and pulling a letter from his breast-pocket, "And I am your mother's older brother. I received this letter from your father ten days ago, entrusting your care to me."

Dio stares.

Though it had always struck him as odd -- his mother's ability to read and write -- he had never considered her to be from nobility. Nobles were lazy pigs who prospered off of other people's work. His mother had clawed and struggled for each scrap of bread and every drop of soup. Nobles could afford private tutors for their children. Nobles didn't die in dilapidated buildings, wasting their last breaths on weak apologies.

"Lord Joestar," the driver starts, clearing his throat, "I apologize for rushing you, but it seems the carriage is holding up traffic."

"Park it somewhere else then," the Viscount commands, "I have a brother-in-law to bury and a nephew to meet."

'No,' Dio wants to say. 'No, don't bury that man.'

The words are lodged in his throat however and he finds himself dragged along like a puppet. From shop to shop, and finally to the graveyard -- he had waited three days for the priest to give his mother's corpse the last rites. His father can rest comfortably in the most expensive plot of land within twenty-four hours of his death.

'Why are you burying him?' he wants to ask. 'The man who killed my mother does not deserve this sort of burial.'

It is only when the stars have risen and they are in the carriage that Dio finds his voice again. George Joestar has bought him a new set of clothing made of material worth more than the whole flat. Dio has leather shoes, knee-high striped socks, suspenders, a matching trouser and jacket combination, and a starched white shirt to boot.

"The letter," he says. "I want to see the letter."

"Of course," George Joestar murmurs, handing the envelope over.

It sickens Dio to have to look at his father's handwriting again, but he does so anyways. The dead man has made no effort at punctuation and his spelling is still atrocious. He manages to spew forth a decade's worth of lies in two short paragraphs: talking about how happy Dio's mother had been in
the slums, how she had insisted against writing to the Viscount for help, how she had only recanted on her deathbed, and how Dario, being the loving husband and father he was, was fulfilling his wife's last wishes.

It's garbage. Every single word -- absolute trash.

He looks up from the letter, feeling bile in his throat, and sees the Viscount Joestar with tears in his eyes.

"I did not want my sister to go," he says, "But I knew that man would make her happy." He closes his eyes and does a quick cross, "I know that they will find happiness together in heaven."

And Dio hates him. Hates, hates, hates him. He hates how this man is so willfully blind -- choosing to believe the words of his sister's murderer over the obvious truth -- and how his money allowed him to stay ignorant.

He decides then and there that he will have his revenge on the Viscount Joestar: the man who turned a blind eye to his mother's sufferings, the man who gave his worthless father a lavish funeral. The man who hoped -- hoped! -- that his mother and father would meet in heaven.

With careful movements, he hands the letter back, biting the inside of his cheek to force a couple tears to fall.

"Thank you," he says, bowing his head and hoping the nobleman wouldn't be able to hear any animosity, "I am most grateful to you, Lord Joestar."

And so it is while harboring an utter enmity for the duplicitous man before him and intent on repaying past hypocrisies that Dio enters the childhood home of his mother.
Hello, Viscount and Baron Joestar

Although Lord Joestar tells the driver to proceed without delay and though Dio catches him paying off a highwayman without breaking a sweat, he nonetheless insists on a warm meal and a proper bed each night. In the end, even though they have access to (and make good use of) the traveling routes exclusive to the nobility, the journey from London takes three nights and four days. When the horses pull into the paved driveway and canter towards the courtyard, the sun is halfway below the horizon. Its muted rays signalling the final days of winter give the brickwork a golden tint.

The driver reins in the horses and the carriage comes a halt.

A footman comes running to open the door; Dio sees that a lacquered stool has been set down for ease of access.

"After you," Lord Joestar says. Dio quietly gives thanks before he steps out of the carriage and sees a well-kept entranceway with a magnificent fountain in the center. The Viscount hands his nephew's single piece of luggage to the footman, clasping Dio's shoulder and leading the way to the foyer.

"I mean no offense," Lord Joestar begins, clearing his throat as, like magic, the front doors open for them, "But in time, I hope you shall see this place as home."

"Thank you," Dio repeats.

"Welcome home, Viscount!" some two dozen neatly-lined-up servants chorus, bowing as one.

Dio's awe is significantly stunted by a giddy shout from the grand staircase.

"Father!" a dark-haired boy (who, in retrospect, is the spitting image of George Joestar) takes the stairs two at a time, a black-and-white spotted dog trailing behind him.

"Jojo!" the Viscount greets, opening his arms and allowing his son to embrace. "I'm sorry for being gone for so long, but -- didn't I tell you not to let Danny in the house?"

"Sorry Father," the boy, Jojo, laughs, stepping back and hugging the large dog, "But it was so lonely without you!"

Lord Joestar is not angry at all, playfully pinching his son's nose before stage-whispering for a nearby maid to take the dog to its own house. The scene is so foreign to Dio, he has no idea how to react. Thankfully, Lord Joestar remembers him within seconds, clapping a hand on his shoulder and presenting Dio to his son.

"Dio, I'd like you to meet my son. You boys will be living under the same roof from now on. Jojo is the same age as you, only a couple months younger, so I hope you'll get along."

"Hello," the other boy says, extending his hand. "I'm Jonathan, but everyone calls me Jojo."

"Hello," Dio replies, mimicking Jonathan's smile and shaking firmly, "I'm Dio. Nice to meet you."

"Good!" Lord Joestar says, clapping his hands, "It looks like you're already friends. Now what say we get some supper and Jojo can show you to your room afterwards?"

"Yes please," Dio says, smile still in place.
"Great!" Jonathan grins, leading both of them to the dining room, "I'm starving!"

The manor's cook has pulled out all the stops for this dinner: there are four courses, not counting the soup, salad, or dessert, and a pheasant stuffed to the size of a small dog. Mr. Joestar (as he insists Dio refer to him as such) tears up again when he sees Dio eating. Although it's more utensils than he's seen in his life, the basics of eating small portions, chewing with your mouth closed, and keeping movement as minimal as possible still apply. Apparently Mr. Joestar had needed his wife to teach him table manners. She died when Jonathan was a babe however, and Jonathan subsequently eats like a pig.

Dio accepts the Viscount's compliments with grace, bowing his head and giving thanks in-turn. The size of the manor had been daunting enough -- he had not expected the Viscount to have a son to boot. He needs to bide his time and keep his ire in-check. No, more than that, he needs to lie through his teeth while re-assessing the situation. Mr. Joestar had spent the whole carriage ride telling Dio about his sister's childhood; Dio, in turn, had fabricated dozens of trite stories about his mother's time in the slums. That the Viscount had so easily eaten the fabrications up -- that he had wanted to hear them -- is another strike against him. However, as a result of this back-and-forth, the Viscount had forgotten to mention Jonathan entirely and so, Dio had been under the impression that he was to be adopted by a childless nobleman -- a direct relative -- and in-line to inherit his title.

That idea had been intensely revolting and he had originally planned to steal as many valuables as possible before taking his leave. He has spent his whole life hating nobility; to become one of the lazy elite would be a fate worse than death. Well, that is Dio's philosophy at the moment.

When dinner ends, Jonathan obediently leads Dio to the third floor. His new room is a spacious bedroom easily twice the size of his parent's abode. There is a four-poster bed, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, an empty bookshelf, a writing desk, two armchairs, and a coffee table. Someone has already brought his luggage up, it has been placed in a folding stand. Jonathan shows him the balcony and the bathroom, as well as the boiler room. The latter is located between their two rooms.

"Father told me about you, you know?" Jonathan says, after he's finished the little tour.

"Oh?" Dio raises an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry to hear about your parents," the boy continues, "But I'm sure they'll be watching you from heaven!"

Dio clenches and quickly unclenches his jaw, forcing himself to smile for the twelfth time since meeting the other boy.

"Thank you," he lies.

"I'm really glad to have met you," Jonathan adds, "The other kids make fun of me for living in this place." He flushes, looking away, "What I'm trying to say is: we're family and even if I can't do much right now, if you need anything let me know!" He squeezes Dio's hand and gives another big smile before dashing off to his own bedroom. It is only when Jonathan has closed his door that Dio stops smiling. Slowly, he lifts his dirtied hand to his face, scowling at it. He goes to the bathroom and scrubs until his palms are red. Then he goes back to his own room and unlocks his suitcase, changing into a fur-lined sleeping gown Mr. Joestar had purchased from one of the roadside inns. Exhaustion catches up to him then and he crawls underneath the blankets. The luxury of it all is enough to make him vomit. He holds his bile back however, and manages to drift to sleep.
Mr. Joestar sends for a tailor the next day and after three hours of measurements and fittings, Dio is told his new wardrobe will be available by the end of the week. As it is a week-end, and a Saturday at that, there are no lessons. And so Jonathan takes him on a tour of the grounds -- the gardens and orchards and tombs in particular -- and Dio allows himself to be led. Although it is not yet spring, flowers are nonetheless blooming in the Joestar garden. In the sweltering greenhouse, Jonathan splits a freshly-plucked orange with him, chattering animatedly about the springtime scenery. Dio nods and gives a believable enough imitation of paying attention.

But there is only so much blather he will subject himself to. When the boy's dog, Danny, comes running up and Jonathan leaves to go walk him, Dio declines his invitation to come along, citing that he was tired and needed a nap. He hates animals, dogs in particular, but if he will be honest, he finds Jonathan to be far worse than his dog.

Instead of sleeping, he spends the rest of the day exploring the manor. At first glance, it seemed enormous. Now that he is combing through the rooms and walking up and down flights upon flights of stairs, Dio revises his opinion. The manor is more than enormous -- it is colossal. He makes one wrong turn and ends up having to backtrack to the foyer in order to return to his bedroom. Whereas he could pace the whole of his parents' flat in thirty-five steps, he finds himself losing count after one thousand with the Joestar manor. And then he discovers the library -- shelves upon shelves of books, many of them in Latin, French, and Italian -- and stops his exploration to read.

It is his discovery of the library that makes him think: 'I could live here'.

No, more than that, he begins to think: 'I want to live here'.

But those are dangerous thoughts and he knows that reading, as with all things, must be done with purpose. For wasn't that the key reason to hate the nobles: those vain and slothful creatures who could do things on a whim? Who could live the whole of their lives guided only by fleeting fancies, to know the definition but not the meaning of the word 'necessity'? Yes, he remembers, he hates these people and their lifestyles and how carelessly their wealth allowed them to act.

Come Sunday and the Viscount takes them to church. They are seated in a special section roped off from the others. The bell rings, the services begin, and when the choir sings, Dio finds himself singing along. The other villagers have come as well. There are three farmhands dressed in their Sunday finest around his age. When the collection plate is passed around and Mr. Joestar is asked to lead the donation count, one of the boys pushes Jonathan and the other two stick out their feet. Jonathan lands in a humiliated heap. Although he is quick to get on his feet and even quicker to put his fists up, the fight is already lost. The Viscount's voice, though quiet, carries across the stock-silent chapel, and Jonathan is left hanging his head in shame for 'no gentleman would brawl in God's house'.

With his face safely obscured by the hymn book, Dio smiles.

Jonathan is understandably sullen on the carriage ride back to the manor. To add insult to injury, his father requires that he write two hundred lines of 'A gentleman does not fight in church', to be due before breakfast. Dio has another free afternoon, which he uses to continue mapping out the manor. By the time supper is called for, Jonathan is a hundred and fifty lines in and the middle finger on his right hand has a bright red callous. He pokes at his food, pushing the pork chops from end to end of the plate, and when he shakes his hand, his father pounds the table in irritation.

"Why can't you be more like Dio?" the Viscount roars, pointing a finger at his golden calf of a nephew, "Look at him! His table manners are perfect!"

"But I -- " Jonathan tries.

"It's not -- " Dio too, begins.

"No," the head of the household declares, "After seeing how Dio acts -- do you know he's spent more time in the library in two days than you have your whole life Jojo?! -- I realize that I've spoiled you!" He takes his napkin out of his collar and dabs at his eyes, "I'm sorry Mary, I promised you I'd raise our son into a gentleman and look at I've let become!"

"But Father...!"

"No Jojo, you will learn to behave yourself or you will go hungry." His father points to the grand staircase, "Finish up your lines and go to sleep. One night without food won't kill you."

With effort, Jojo manages to hold back his tears, morosely making his way up the staircase. On the final step, he turns back, just in time to see Dio looking at him. Their gazes meet for a moment before Dio turns back to the table.

"I'm sorry about him," Lord Joestar sighs, utensils click-clacking once more.

Dio holds his tongue.

When dessert is served, the Viscount sighs a second time.

"I take your silence to mean that I've been overly harsh," he questions, sipping at his goblet.

"It is not my place to presume," Dio carefully replies.

"What about your father?" George Joestar presses, "Did he not punish you?"

Dio laughs before taking another bite of the brulée.

'To have that man as my father is punishment enough,' is on the tip of his tongue.

"My mother taught me etiquette," he says instead.

"I can see as much," the patriarch nods. "Speaking of which, how do you find the manor? Is your room alright? Is there anything you might need?"

Dio pauses, considering.

"Everything is most amenable," he starts, "However..."

"Hm?"

"Well. If I could have some parchment and writing utensils..."

"A notebook and fountainpen, of course." Lord Joestar nods. And then he continues with, "Although my father, may he rest in peace, believed that people only needed to read the Bible, I do not think we should limit ourselves. My sister, bless her soul, certainly didn't." He smiles, raising his goblet, "It warms my heart to see a similar spark in you."

"I am honored," Dio murmurs. He wants nothing more than to rip the man's throat out. How dare the Viscount speak of his mother -- how dare he pretend to cherish her memory when he had believed her dead for years? When, with all his money, he could have easily found his lost sibling with just a couple silvers here and there?
When the dishes are cleared, Mr. Joestar tells him that tutoring will begin at nine o'clock sharp with breakfast half an hour before. The subjects covered will be English literature, British history, European history, Latin, and arithmetic. He is quick to reassure Dio that his son was still in the introductory level for most subjects and that catching up would be a breeze. Dio bids him goodnight and returns to his room. He properly unpacks then, spreading his meagre belongings across the shelves and drawers.

In just one day, he's had to re-evaluate his ambitions. When he douses the candle and closes his eyes, he sees himself wandering the neverending corridors of the manor. Not including any of the first or fourth floor rooms, he has counted sixty-six rooms and five bathrooms (at least) per floor. Sixty-six rooms, each with their own theme and purpose. There is a room filled with mirrors, another with exercise equipment, another that is just pillows and couches, and yet another filled with painting supplies. And this isn't even touching on the treasure trove that is the Joestar library - at a glance, Dio has catalogued more out of print books than the list-makers themselves.

He remembers his mother's last words and scowls.

He wants this, he realizes. He wants all of it. The power, the money, the luxury, the easy-going lifestyle which came as a natural result of having inherited everything. And he will have it and in having it, it will be the sweetest revenge. His mother will be happy too. It was her blood, after all, that brought him into the Joestar's fold, and it was her blood that allowed him to mimic good breeding despite coming from the slums -- impeccable enough that George Joestar would choose him, Dio, over his own son.

And there it lies: the obvious solution. He will show Jonathan up at every opportunity, he will excel in athletics, etiquette, and education, and he will be the one to inherit the estate of his mother's childhood.

With his mind made up, it is easy to hate Jonathan. He is a slow-witted graceless boor who, despite being born to privilege, shows absolutely no sign of class. The prime example is in their tutoring sessions: Dio can memorize words, sentences, and entire passages on sight. Jonathan, who has never had to worry about stolen books being snatched away by a drunken father, needs to reread things -- and read them again, at times! And still, he cannot memorize them. Dio initially thinks the other boy is playing dumb, that he will reveal a secret talent or begin to make an effort, seeing as how Dio is showing him up at every opportunity.

But Jonathan does not improve. Not at the required pace, at least. In the months when spring has settled into the countryside, Dio is still ahead of the Viscount's son and the Viscount's son does not bat an eye.

Dio discovers the reason for his carefree response to life in his second week at the manor. He is sitting on the balcony, relishing in a particularly good read, while Jonathan is playing in the front porch with his dog. Mr. Joestar is seated on the second-floor balcony and Dio can see him at an angle.

The Viscount, he cannot help but notice, is not doing anything. He is simply sitting and staring down. Jonathan throws the ball; his dog chases after it. It runs back to him and he throws it again. It sails too high this time, and he nearly hits his father. The Viscount catches it and tosses it back with only a laugh. His son laughs too, throwing the ball yet again, before waving and dashing off.

George Joestar loves his son, Dio realizes. He loves Jonathan because Jonathan is his flesh and blood and he will love him and will want the best for him regardless of how poorly he ate or how
slowly he learned Latin conjugations. It is this love that allows him to be stricter with Jonathan and, on the flipside, allows him to praise Dio at every opportunity. Because Mr. Joestar cares for Dio about as much as he cared for Dio's mother.

He has read a story like this, he thinks, closing the book and going back to his bedroom. A rich man adopted an incredibly pauper to be a lifelong servant to his practically-disabled son. And the pauper in that story was grateful and ended up serving the man's son for the rest of his life. It had been lauded as a tale of kindness and friendship and lifelong loyalty -- the ideal which the non-inheritors should strive towards.

The thought of playing second fiddle to Jonathan Joestar makes him sick.

No, he thinks, shaking his head. He will not allow for it.
And so it is with the cut-and-dry conclusiveness most prevalent in adolescence that Dio formulates a new plan. If Mr. Joestar wants a lapdog for his son, then a lapdog his son shall have. Towards the Viscount, Dio will play the part of the orphaned nephew; towards the Viscount's son, Dio will play the part of friend and confident. Although both of them have welcomed him with open arms, he knows that a handful of days in just the beginning. More than weeks or months, he is looking at years. But he will do it, he will be pleasant and smile and overlook the Joestars' faults if it meant they would bring him into the fold.

And then, when he comes of age, he'll arrange an accident for both father and son. Perhaps they shall go the same route as his father: a curious incurable illness by the way of oriental medicine. And then they will be dead and by the process of common law, he, a blood relative and an adopted son, will be shoed in for the inheritance.

Yes, he concludes, closing the history book and holding back a smile (the back of Jonathan's hand was so red; the boy had forgotten how the accusative declined). It is a solid plan, aided greatly by Mr. Joestar having officially entered him in the family registry, and though it will take years to see through, to have the estate his mother should have had fall into his hands by the end of it... it will be worth it.

Play nice, he reminds himself when Jonathan works up the nerve to pull him aside after their lessons.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Dio asks, smiling. The summer heat is stifling.

"Yes," Jonathan nods, looking especially serious.

Dio stares, trying to fight off the nausea that came from the other boy's hand around his arm. Jonathan seems to have forgotten himself entirely.

"Well?" Dio prompts, "What is it?"

"Um. That is..." Jonathan mumbles something or another.

"What?"

"I was wondering -- if you have the time -- if you could teach me how to eat properly!" the younger boy blurts out.

"Your nails are digging into me."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Jonathan quickly pulls his hand back.

On one hand, he really didn't want to spend additional time with the other boy. After two weeks of being pupils under Mr. Joestar's tutelage, Dio can already tell that Jonathan is the worst sort of student: brash, loud, lazy, and utterly incapable of following simple instructions. Plus, his mealtime manners were getting worse (a feat Dio wouldn't have thought possible). But on the other hand, there is the role Dio has set out for himself and the inheritance he can see so clearly. Sixty-six rooms, he reminds himself, looking the other boy in the eye.

"Of course," he eventually replies. "I admit I'm not much of a teacher, but if you think you can learn..."
"Oh thank you!" Jonathan sighs, and his whole body slouches in relief, "Meet me at my room after supper, I need to get ready!" And then he scurries off in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Dio at the library doorway.

After Dio washes his hands and rolls up his sleeves to scrub at where Jonathan had gripped him, he briefly contemplates killing the other boy. It was ridiculous to teach a monkey the finer points of dining -- especially if said monkey was going to be killed off. But no, he cannot guarantee his own survival with Jonathan out of the picture. Although the Viscount makes a big show of treating them equally, he has still brought Dio in to be a lifelong servant to his son.

He spends the rest of the afternoon reading up on table etiquette. Apparently there was a reason to every motion; more rules to the nobles' strange games. He suspects that whoever wrote the book loathed the act of eating, it was the only acceptable explanation for there being so many musn'ts. One must not hold the fork in one's left hand unless one is using a knife or spoon. One must not hold two utensils of the same shape at once. One must not lower one's head while eating, unless one was eating an oriental soup. One must not stretch across other people. One must not set one's elbows on the table.

One must not... must not...

Dio tosses the book. It hits one of the bedposts and lands on the bed. He forgoes a detailed plan and sticks instead to the same basics his mother had drilled into him. Don't chew with your mouth open, never have your mouth full, always cut as small and fine as possible, and remember to keep your arms close. With Jonathan's dim-witted academic progression in-mind, they would be lucky if he managed to get past the first point. In preparation for the trying evening ahead, he decides to take a nap.

At suppertime, he picks at his food. Jonathan would probably make him eat three plates just to learn the basic 'don't chew with your mouth dangling open you stupid cow' and he does not want to vomit. If Mr. Joestar is concerned with his lack of appetite, he does not mention it. It is only when Jonathan leaves his dessert untouched that he asks. Jonathan lies, saying there was a book he wanted to finish reading, and Mr. Joestar eats it up.

Although the chef is no good at making Italian sweets, Dio finishes the honeyed cream before wiping his mouth and bidding the Viscount good night. He takes his time walking up the stairs, vaguely hoping that Jonathan had fallen asleep.

He hasn't, of course, and he almost trips over himself opening the door in his eagerness.

"Ah, Dio!" Jonathan greets, beaming, "Thank you so much, come in -- " he ushers the older boy into his bedroom and Dio takes a look around. It is roughly the same size as his own with the same furniture. Everything is in a lighter color and there is the smell of potpourri, no doubt hiding the stench of dog. The writing table has been cleared away and it is wedged between the two armchairs. There is a complete set of silverware and china on the coffee table.

"Where did you get this?" Dio asks as he's helping the other boy move the utensils from table to table. Experimentally, he lifts a knife. Judging by weight alone, it seems to be solid silver.

"I told one of the maids that Father needed a set."

That the other boy is capable of lying is news to Dio.

After they've set the table and Jonathan has seated himself, Dio frowns at the scene before him.
"Wait," he starts, "Where is the food?"

"Food?" Jonathan echoes, "But we just ate."

'I didn't,' Dio does not say. 'And I have no idea how to teach you table manners without real food.'

"Alright," he sighs, seating himself down opposite Jonathan with his back to the balcony, "Let's begin."

As a result of his low standards and even lower expectations, Dio finds that Jonathan isn't the drooling dog-and-oranges idiot he had initially assessed him to be. His hand-eye coordination is quite good for one, and he could actually concentrate for extended periods of time. He's mastered all four rules within an hour and when Dio grudgingly tells him good job, Jonathan lets go of both fork and spoon, laughing riotously.

Dio raises an eyebrow, setting his cutlery down too.

"What?" he asks, when Jonathan will not stop chuckling.

"It's just -- " he chokes out, pressing his face against the plate, all manners forgotten, "I realized -- we must look so ridiculous!"

Dio would scowl if he hadn't spent the past hour eating from an empty fork. But even he can admit it is quite comical, and he laughs a little too.

Jonathan catches his breath and stands up, clapping his hands.

"Alright! Let's see Father send me off to bed without dinner now!" he declares, looking far too confident. Dio helps him pack the silverware and china back into the picnic basket, and the two of them decide to set it in Jonathan's wardrobe so Jonathan could sneak it back into the kitchen without anyone being the wiser.

When they are making room for the basket in Jonathan's well-stocked wardrobe, Dio pauses, caught in the middle of shoving some winter coats to the side.

"Dio?" Jonathan questions, "Is something the matter?"

"What," Dio starts, taking a step back, "is that?"

"Huh?" Jonathan sets the basket down, walking over. He looks into the wardrobe and back at Dio. "What?"

"That," Dio repeats, pointing.

Jonathan's brows furrow. He remembers his father had given him a spiel about treating Dio naturally, reminding him that life in the city was not so different from the countryside.

"You've never seen a dress before?" he asks, trying to be polite.

"I've seen dresses," Dio splutters, looking from the garment to the boy, "But what is that doing in your closet?"

"It's my dress...?" Jonathan slowly answers, still confused.

"What!" Dio exclaims, sent into a new bout of surprise. "That's your dress?"
"Of course," he takes it off of its hanger, holding it out, "I can't wear it anymore obviously, but..." he laughs, "I have good memories of it!" He catches Dio's slack-jawed expression and tilts his head. "What's the matter? Didn't you wear them too?"

"No," Dio replies, slowly shaking his head. "Why would I?"

"So then... have you worn trousers all your life?"

"Of course," Dio spits, more agitated than necessary. "What else is there? Dresses are for women."

"That's true," Jonathan nods, "But Father always told me it was normal. Something about breeches being too difficult for children to use. For, well," he makes a small gesture, "You know. That sort of stuff."

Dio stares at the familiar-looking fluttery piece of clothing, trying to wrap his mind around the idea. At first he had thought the Viscount's son to be an open pervert, but now it seemed that young noblemen all wore dresses? The dress is quite long, easily going past Jonathan's knees, and when he looks back at the other boy, he sees his still-perplexed expression.

"Can you..." he tries, "Can you put it on?"

His voice is strangely hoarse.

Jonathan knits his eyebrows tighter.

"Why?"

"I'm curious," Dio discloses, feigning nonchalance. "We didn't... well, I've never seen this sort of thing."

"Okay," Jonathan shrugs, evidently seeing no harm in the request. A favor for a favor. "But just once. It's not proper to wear this sort of thing after you can tie your own laces after all."

Dio nods.

And then Jonathan strips out of his clothing and Dio putting his hands up, squawking at the indignity of it.

"What's the matter now?" Jonathan asks, easily shimmying into the dress. "Haven't you gone swimming before?"

"There are suits people wear for those occasions," Dio snaps. He doesn't know why he's so affected.

"Oh. Right." Jonathan laughs, striking a silly pose, "Well, it doesn't matter. We're both boys, and family at that. You can look now Dio, weren't you the one who wanted to see?"

"You look ridiculous," Dio bites, after he's painstakingly lowered his hands. His cheeks are red and his mind is spinning. With sudden clarity, he remembers where he had seen the dress -- no, more than that, who he had seen the dress on --

"Oh I'm sure of that," Jonathan good-naturedly replies. He twirls and the dress goes up at his knees. "But it's kind of comfortable you know? The Scots still like their kilts, after all. One of Father's friends says it's the most comfortable thing to wear."

"Trousers," Dio begins, voice dripping with disgust, "Are for men."
The other boy only laughs.

He has no idea how it happens, and he blames the other boy entirely. In the blink of an eye, Dio Brando finds himself being helped into one of Jonathan's older dresses. He's not even struggling, which is the most pathetic part. No, he is instead watching himself, for Jonathan has somehow moved them to the mirror and is now clumsily fumbling through the laces of the bodice. The second dress has a petticoat and is subsequently much heavier than Jonathan's frock. Jonathan mentions something about how the butler had needed to carry him to functions for the gown had been so heavy when he was a child, and Dio tunes him out. Although he is sweating underneath, it is not entirely uncomfortable.

Jonathan, of course, will not shut up.

"I'm sorry," he says upon finishing, "The maids always helped me tie them so I have no idea how they work. I could ask for one, if you'd like it."

"You will do no such thing," Dio snarls.

"I jest, I jest," Jonathan snickers, clutching at his stomach. "And we do look pretty ridiculous, I'll give you that. I guess there's a reason the Scots don't use so many frills."

Fortunately, Dio does not need to respond to that comment. Unfortunately, it is because of the knock on and subsequent opening of the door. Lord Joestar steps into his son's room, takes one look at the state of affairs, and reels backwards in a roaring laughter.

"Father...!" Jonathan whines, stomping his foot. The action causes his train to slip slightly and Lord Joestar only guffaws harder.

Dio can feel his ears heating up; he quickly changes out of the dress, ripping the bodice in the process.

"Ack!" Jonathan winces, sticking his head through his sweater, "Why'd you rip it?"

"Because you made me wear it!"

"Hey! You made me wear one too!"

"Boys, boys..." Mr. Joestar chuckles, wiping at his eyes, "It makes me happy to see the two of you getting along, but -- "

"He just ripped my -- " Jonathan accuses, right as Dio splutters, "We are not -- "

They quiet down when Mr. Joestar raises his hand.

"It's a quarter to midnight and you both need to be in bed. Dio, I'm sorry you didn't enjoy supper tonight, I'll ask the cook to make something lighter tomorrow. Jojo, didn't you say you were going to put those dresses into storage? This is why your clothes are always so wrinkled!"

"I will!" Jonathan is quick to reply, "I'll put them away tomorrow! It's just that Dio said he had always worn trousers!"

Dio shoots him a furious glance.

"Hmmm..." Mr. Joestar muses. "Did you now?" And then he smiles again, ruffling both boys' hair, "I'll have you know that the dress you were wearing, yes you Dio, was a hand-me-down from
Jojo's mother. And Jojo's dress, well, my younger sister had a steady hand with the needle." And before either boy can process the implications, he claps them on the shoulder and pushes Jonathan towards his bed and turns Dio towards the door, "But now is the time for good boys to go to sleep."

Jonathan remains true to his word, packing the half-dozen dresses into a crate the next afternoon. He's snuck the picnic basket into the kitchen already, and quickly rings for a butler to carry said crate away.

In the hallway, Dio watches the dragging of the crate up the attic stairs. Then he returns to his room, only for Jonathan to throw it open and drag him for another romp through the great outdoors. Dio refuses to enjoy himself, though Jonathan convinces him to throw the ball a couple times. When they return in time for supper, Mr. Joestar is suitably impressed at his son's display of table manners. Dio preens too, just a little, but catches himself and stops it.

Jonathan is determined to be chivalrous however, giving credit where credit is due, and Mr. Joestar gives his thanks as well.

Summer and fall pass through the manor and the days grow short soon enough.

Late one night, when the candles have been blown out and the central hearth has been lit, Dio has a dream. A nightmare, really. He doesn't remember the details, just that his mother was involved and he was unable to do anything but watch. He wakes in a cold sweat, in no good sense of mind, and he throws off the blankets and blindly stumbles forward. The curtains are tossed to the side and the balcony doors are thrown open. Though the night air is freezing, but he can't feel the cold.

He reaches for the stars in a practically feverish state.

"Dio?" a voice calls, "What are you doing up?"

He snaps to attention, whirling around, only to see Jonathan leaning against the ledge of his own balcony. He opens his mouth, but cannot come up with an excuse. If Jonathan tells his father, it will be enough evidence to label him as a madman. And he cannot have that.

"You're going to get sick like that," Jonathan continues, throwing the blanket that was around his own shoulders across the gap.

"No I'm not," Dio drawls. He catches it anyways. The blanket smells of dog; he'll need a shower in the morning.

"Hey Dio," Jonathan calls, as if Dio's attention were somewhere else, "What do you want for Christmas?"

As per usual, it is the innocuousness of the question that catches him off-guard. He was aware of the holiday of course, his mother had insisted on celebrating it up until her death. But he had always thought of it as a day people were especially benevolent to pickpockets and other petty criminals and he certainly could not recall receiving presents.

"Well?"

"It doesn't matter. Go to sleep." He tosses the blanket back over and turns to the balcony door, grunting noncommitally at Jonathan's cheerful 'goodnight!'.

They are strangely similar -- aunt and nephew. Not in terms of mannerisms or preferences, but something deeper. It scares him, the idea of Jonathan resembling his mother. Because he needs Jonathan dead in order to take his inheritance, and he needs the estate in order to avenge his
mother.

In the world outside, the first snowfall of winter begins.
Merry Christmas from the Joestar Manor!

The shower Dio had been planning to take never comes. Instead, Jonathan's throwing open his door at the crack of dawn, jumping up and down with excitement. His stupid dog is barking too, and Dio wants nothing more than to shut them both up. Permanently. Instead, he throws on a sweater and some trousers and lets Jonathan lead him through the hallway, down the spiral staircase, and into the snow-covered courtyard.

The newly-made landscape takes his breath away.

Has he spent nearly a year in this place? He can remember arriving when the snow had just finished melting. Evidently, they had, and now the Joestar manor and surrounding countryside had been coated in a good foot of snow. It was still snowing, light little flakes lazily making their way down. The bleak winter sun filters through the thick clouds, giving blueish-gray shadows to their footsteps.

"C'mon Dio, try to catch a snowflake!" Jonathan urges, tilting his head back.

Dio frowns, resentfully sticking out an undercovered arm.

"No, not like that," the other boy sighs, reaching out and tugging on Dio's hair. Dio glares ineffectually (reminding himself of the inheritance) and allows it. "Now open your mouth and close your eyes."

"This is stupid," he says. Has been saying nonstop since meeting Jonathan, come to think of it.

"It's the first snowfall of the year!"

"How is that a reason?"

Jonathan shrugs. "Ah!" he exclaims, laughing anew, "Mmm, I caught one! Water always tastes good like this."

Dio refrains from making a snide comment on dirtiness of the snow. It's childish, but he doesn't want to be outdone even here. So he tilts his head back again, closing his eyes.

He is promptly hit in the face with a clump of snow.

"Pffahahaha!" Jonathan crows with laughter, jogging off while Dio mutters some choice words under his breath. He wipes the slush from his face and bends down. London had had snowball fights as well. It was one of the few memories he had of playing on a team. His team had always won of course, and this time will be no different, he thinks, letting the tightly-packed snowball sail straight and low.

It hits Jonathan behind the knee and he gives a cry of surprise, doing a forward roll through the snow.

"Oh?" he asks, eyes sparkling with zest, "Are you getting serious now?"

Dio answers with a snowball to the face.

Somehow or another, the servants and Mr. Joestar let them play in the snow for a good hour, neither of them dressed appropriately. By the end of it, they're both completely soaked, from their
socks to their collars, and Mr. Joestar boxes both their ears before sending them to the baths. Dio curses himself for getting caught up in the younger boy's pace. He had never liked snow and certainly felt no pleasure in consuming it, yet the other had managed to goad him into an hour-long snowball fight before breakfast. It's his competitive streak, he knows. He can't stand the thought of being second to anyone, least of all spoiled country bumpkins.

After breakfast, Mr. Joestar begins their lessons again, this time they're starting a week's worth of ancient history, the stuff of Greeks and Romans. Jonathan listens attentively; history was the one subject he would actually read books for, and Dio feels strangely lightheaded, watching the younger boy's enthralled expression. Right as Mr. Joestar is introducing the primary sources of note, Dio finds himself unable to sit upright. The world swoons and he hears both Viscount and son call his name in alarm.

The next time he wakes, he's looking at a now-familiar canopy, tucked into his own bed. He groans, attempting to move his limbs, and hears his name again.

"Dio!" Jonathan exclaims, slamming his book shut and running to his side, "How are you? How do you feel? Father brought a doctor to look at you and he thinks you just got a fever. I'm so sorry for asking you to come play in the snow with me -- I never would have if I knew you were going to get this sick!"

He finds it extremely difficult to focus on the individual words, especially as --

"Stones behind my eyes," he complains, lying back down.

Jonathan blinks.

"Uh... what was that?" And then, when Dio doesn't respond instantaneously, he shakes the other's shoulder, "Dio, are you okay? I -- I'll get a maid now!"

"Shut up," Dio sighs, throwing off the other's hand. "You're too loud. My head hurts."

"Oh. Sorry," Jonathan says, quieting down. Then he gets on his knees and whispers, "What were you saying before?"

"Jonathan," Dio snaps, feeling his blood pressure skyrocket, "It's not whispering if you're talking quietly into my ear!" His outburst leaves him out of sorts, labored breaths and heaving chest. Jonathan surprises him again, with his odd tenacious streak. The moment Dio relaxes his brow, he dabs at it with a wet towel.

"What are you doing?" he demands. He would glare if his eyelids didn't feel so weighed down.

"The doctor said to keep your head dry and cool."

"That's a wet towel."

"Right." Even with his eyes closed, Dio can see the other studiously nodding. "And here's a dry one." He uses said dry towel to trace Dio's brow. The contrast between cold and warm is a pleasant one -- and Dio recognizes it. And there it is again, that throb of irritation.

"You should've told me you were sick," Jonathan chides, "Father's forbidden me from dessert for a week."

"What a tragedy," Dio drawls.
"It is, it is! This was before you came, but Father once had a party when I was grounded and I wasn't allowed to come! It was the worst Christmas ever, I could smell all the food but even the butler wouldn't sneak me any!"

'I had to live for a month on breadcrumbs,' Dio thinks of saying.

"Also, it's no good if you're sick on Christmas," Jonathan adds, "Because then you can't help decorate the tree."

"I don't care," Dio growls, sitting up and curling his upper lip, "You can keep to your celebrations, but leave me out of them. I hate winter. I hate the snow. I hate -- " He wants to say 'here', but the lie will not leave his lips. He snaps his mouth shut and glares instead. The sudden movement turns out to be terrible idea, he feels a wave of nausea and is further humiliated when Jonathan pulls a tin bucket out of nowhere and places it in Dio's lap.

Jonathan has good instincts; he holds Dio's hair back, patiently waiting for the other boy to vomit up his last two meals.

"Are you done?" he asks. Dio falls back, too tired to nod.

The younger boy lifts the bucket up and dashes out.

Mr. Joestar pays him a visit in the evening, personally bringing up the porridge and soup, and the doctor comes a second time to take his temperature and declare that his fever had broken. But it is Jonathan who stays by his side for the whole week. At first Dio thinks that the other only wants to skip his lessons, but Mr. Joestar negates that theory, announcing that the Peloponnesian War would have to be postponed until Dio recovered. And then he thinks that Jonathan just wanted the company of someone who could only listen. But later, he's forced to conclude that the other boy genuinely felt guilty for making Dio sick.

It is ridiculous of course, and Dio tells him as much. But Jonathan is stubborn and he only ever leaves to walk his dog. He takes books and sweets to Dio's room, lazily stretched out across the two armchairs, and in a matter of days, Dio's bookshelf is half-filled. Jonathan has a bearable enough voice; for all his faults, his enunciation was impeccable, and though his stamina was laughable, Dio can expect to be read a hundred pages or so each night.

In one of his hazier moments, Dio admits to hating the dog for stealing Jonathan's company from him. Once again, he is quick to correct himself. Jonathan was a bother, a thorn in his side he wouldn't be able to take out for years. Hadn't he decided he prefered the dog to the boy?

Come Sunday and Dio can eat solid food again. Mr. Joestar has been asked to help with Christmas decorations at the church, so the two boys return to the manor first.

On the other side of the carriage, Jonathan beams at him. Dio pulls his gaze from the scenery, turning over.

"What?"

"Nothing." And then, when Dio raises an eyebrow, he adds: "I'm happy you're feeling better."

Dio snorts, returning to look out of the window.

Right as the horses are approaching the front gates, Dio breaks the silence.

"Why do you care?"
"Because you're family?" Jonathan answers, tilting his head. "Why? Is it weird?"

'Yes,' Dio is sorely tempted to say, 'Yes it is strange that you care for someone who would kill you in a heartbeat. No, who will be killing you down the road.' He shakes his head, saying nothing. He can use Jonathan's soft-hearted nature to his advantage. Has planned on it, in fact.

"That's good," the younger boy sighs, stretching his limbs as the footman comes running. As they're walking back to the manor entrance, he continues with, "I'm glad you're more relaxed now, you know? Ah, not that it's any of my business. It's just that your fake smile was... that is... I'll be quiet now." He runs off to roll about in the lawn with his dog, leaving Dio to contemplate his confession.

Unfortunately, very few emotions have grounding without reciprocation. And so it happens that Dio mulls Jonathan's explanation for the next couple days. Flesh and blood was important, when it was approached correctly. But he does not want to place too much emphasis on family -- the idea that his father's blood runs through his veins will never cease to sicken him. He still cannot forgive the Viscount for ignoring his mother and so readily believing his father's lies, but as for the Viscount's son -- as for Dio's younger cousin?

The younger boy inspires a strange magnanimity in him. Dio ends up accompanying Jonathan and his dog on walks through the woods. Their afternoons are spent trading off reading passages aloud and their evenings are spent in casual conversation. Sometimes Mr. Joestar joins them for card games by the fireside. It is only a handful of times for the Viscount is quite busy with Christmas planning, but Dio cannot shake off his annoyance.

With the coming of Christmas comes the Christmas tree and the Christmas feast, and the Boxing Day Gala.

The nineteenth century and the rise of Queen Victoria's morals mean that it has become fashionable to give gifts on Christmas Day, as opposed to New Years. Amongst the nobility, Dio discovers that especially lavish gifts were practically expected. Mr. Joestar gives him a slip of paper with the name of a Baron's child, stating that the children would be doing a present exchange. Jonathan's slip has a Duke's son's child. He gives the boys extra spending money and sends them into town to purchase appropriate gifts.

Jonathan fails to surreptitiously sneak off. Dio turns a blind eye; he plans to shop for gifts as well.

In addition to the gift exchange, the Gala will also include a ball. Although neither Dio nor Jonathan had a fiancée and Mr. Joestar resolutely remained a widower, there was a large possibility of being asked to dance. The married women in particular would be humoring the younger men -- and likely scouting prospective husbands for their own daughters. It is a good thing Dio is not given the chance to voice his opinion; harsh words would likely be used.

Because the Queen has married a German and the Germans are utterly shameless, the English court is in love with the waltz. As it is, Mr. Joestar ends the lessons a week early, hiring a ballroom dance instructor for the boys. It is a scandalous dance, Dio thinks, stepping in-tune to the instructor's cane while holding onto a nonexistent partner. His mother had taught him the far superior pavane.

As with their lessons, Dio picks things up faster than Jonathan. Unlike their lessons, being last place did not mean a smack with the ruler. The instructor is the third son of a Baron; he would not dare touch a Viscount's heir. Instead, he focuses additional attention on his failing pupil, giving
Jonathan extra practice by taking the lead.

Jonathan is embarrassed to be caught dancing with another man; Dio is _livid_.

While the instructor is dancing with Jonathan, Dio ties a string across the spiral staircase. And then he ties two more strings, two steps apart from one another, just to be certain. The instructor ends up tripping on the second string. Dio had hoped he would snap his neck; the man fractures his ankle instead. Jonathan and the servants come running out at the instructors shout and Dio needs to hurry down the stairs, cutting the string with his switchblade before making a big show of helpfulness.

The third son of a Baron is paid off well, Dio is thanked for his quick response, and no one is the wiser. He retrieves the string at midnight and burns the evidence with a set of matches stolen from the eldest countryside boy.

When the second dance instructor comes, Dio makes sure to forget his previous lessons, easily underperforming Jonathan who (though he is a loathe to admit it) has actually improved.

On Christmas Day, Jonathan wakes him up before the sun has risen and pulls him down the grand staircase. The Christmas tree in the parlor is a sight to see, lit by a hundred self-contained candles. There are books and board games and stuffed animals and clothes. With satisfaction, Dio notes that Jonathan is immensely pleased with his new cashmere scarf. He himself is touched by the pen-and-quill set.

There are a dozen cracker bonbons scattered about. Jonathan makes a fuss about not waking the house up even though it's his voice that really carries. While the crackers found peddled on the London streets featured nuts and little else, the crackers bought by Mr. Joestar come with delicately-made candies, each one a different size and shape.

"A Merry Christmas to you, Dio!" Jonathan exuberates. They are sailors in a sea of wrapping paper and it is not yet dawn.

"And to you, Jojo," Dio responds, smiling back and forgetting to lie.
The day after Christmas begins with an obligatory call to church. Mr. Joestar is called upon to stand beside the collection tin; Dio and Jonathan rustle their pockets for change. The tin is passed around and by the time they reach the front of the line, the third tin is halfway through. Jonathan gives a handful of coins: ten shillings, one threepenny, twelve pennies, and sixty-four farthings. Dio carelessly drops three silver crowns and a gold half-sovereign after his cousin.

Mr. Joestar claps him on the back and the priest personally thanks him.

After the church service is done, Mr. Joestar bids the boys return home without him as he needs to go into town to retrieve their dancing costumes.

Jonathan is still in awe over Dio's substantial donation. He says as much on the ride back, asking how Dio would do without a month's worth of allowance. Dio shrugs, giving some dull answer about donating to the church and not being stingy before God and whatnot. The paltry allowance (more than a family's monthly salary back in the slums) is nothing compared to the Joestar estate. He must keep up appearances, he reminds himself, reaching over to adjust Jonathan's scarf.

The whole house is in a flurry for the afternoon: their carriage is set to leave at five, in-time for a seven o'clock arrival, which means the maids have two hours to get them ready. They're led into separate dressing rooms and Dio finds himself bathed and powdered and treated-in-general like a babe. Mr. Joestar has ordered new suits for both of them, matching black-and-white ensembles. As only the very best is acceptable for this occasion, the starched shirt comes with both cuff and collar. He is made to wear a vest on top of the shirt, and a tailcoat on top of that. He has black trousers and leather shoes and discovers Mr. Joestar has commissioned a child-sized top hat, which the maid rests snugly on his finished coiffure.

When he is allowed to turn around and look in the full-length mirror, he initially thinks that his face as been transplanted onto another person's body. But no, this is him, and upon further observation, he sees that the outfit is really quite handsome. The ensemble could do with some color and a wider variety of fabric, but it is a great many step above his plainly suspendered London uniform.

"Wow!" Jonathan says, decked out in his own suit and top hat, "That looks really good on you, Dio!"

"Of course it would," Dio sniffs. He turns around to look Jonathan up-and-down, meeting the other boy's eyes and nodding slightly. "I see the maid's have cleaned you up as well."

"I nearly drowned in the bathtub," the other exaggerates, stepping to the side and holding his arms out. "Hmmm..."

"What?"

"You look more comfortable now. Well, more comfortable than when you were wearing Mother's - - " Dio shuts him up with a glare and Jonathan laughs, putting his hands up, "Come now, don't be angry Dio! It's Boxing Day! Besides, I have a favor to ask of you."

"No," Dio says, remembering where first favor led to all too well.

"But you haven't even heard it yet!"
"I'm sure I won't like it."

"That's why it's called a favor. C'mon Dio, it's Boxing Day!"

"I don't see you delivering parcels," Dio snaps. The allusion goes right by Jonathan, who, whenever faced with something incomprehensible (especially when his older cousin was at fault), unhesitatingly ignored it and continued his initial approach. He wheedles and whines for a whole minute before Dio gives in.

"Alright," he says, adjusting his cuffs and batting away Jonathan's unhelpful hands, "I'll listen to your sordid request -- what is it?"

"Would you let me lead you?" Jonathan asks, beaming. And then, when Dio doesn't understand, he adds, "In a dance, I mean." The revulsion on Dio's face must speak for itself as he quickly adds more, "I don't mean at the gala, I mean right now. You see, the second instructor spent so much more time with you that I'm scared I forgot the basic steps!"

"Jonathan," Dio grates, "The waltz is a box dance. It has three steps."

"Right, right! But because the first instructor always had me in the woman's role, I don't know if I'm supposed to change my feet. Could you tell me if the left foot is meant to lead?"

"The woman's footwork is just a mirror of the man's!"

It's useless trying to talk sense into Jonathan; apparently his father had hinted that it would be in the best interests of his appetite to perform well during the ball and so he's taken to dancing the proper waltz with a fervor.

Though Dio makes a face, he ends up taking Jonathan's hand.

And so commences an extraordinarily awkward shuffle of arms and legs. Both of them forget how starched their shirts were, to say nothing of their well-ironed pants, and Jonathan discovers that the cut of his coat's underarm means he can't get his arm around Dio's waist.

"Could you slow down...!"

"You're completely off tempo! It's three-over-four!"

"But what does that mean?"

"It means -- argh, move your left foot!"

It comes as no surprise that Jonathan ends up tripping over himself and sending both of them tumbling. But before he can even apologize, he is pulled up and onto his feet by his scowling older cousin, whose upper garments have actually been cut to allow his arm over Jonathan's waist.

"Pay attention." Dio demands. His right palm is pressed against the small of Jonathan's back, "One - left foot forward, two - right foot in an 'L', three - left to right, four - right foot backward, five - left foot in a backwards 'L', six - right to left." He ends the six beats turned slightly to the right, properly prepared for the next step. "It's three steps one way and then three steps the other way, what is so difficult to understand?"

He catches Jonathan's expression then. It is giddy and more than a little dazed.

Dio removes his right hand to touch the younger boy's forehead. He doesn't seem to be feverish.
"Dio," Jonathan practically sings, "Can you do that again?"

"What? No." he makes a move to take back his left hand, but Jonathan grabs on tight.

"Please!" Jonathan says, "I think I almost have it. Just one more time! It's just six steps!"

"Fine. But just once."

"Yes!"

Dio goes through the six steps again, and Jonathan actually follows through this time. Once the second set is over, Dio quickly lets go, nicking Jonathan's handkerchief to wipe at his hands.

"Wow Dio," Jonathan breathes, eyes sparkling with unabashed pride, "That was really good. I'm sure the ladies will love dancing with you!"

Thankfully, Mr. Joestar's return means Dio does not need to respond. They hurry into the carriage, with Jonathan bringing a deck of cards and Dio bringing a book, and then they are off.

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The Earl of Willowby has a mansion that makes the Joestar's manor seem quaint. It is a behemoth of an establishment, split into three separate wings, and the ballroom was built to be a theater. Although his children are fully grown, many of his guests have children of their own.

Dio has read about such affluence, but to experience them first-hand is another matter entirely. Though his mother had instilled in him enough decorum to fit in with the Joestars, the fact of the matter was that the Joestars were countryfolk. He tells Jonathan as much and the backhanded insult is ignored entirely. Jonathan grabs his hand as soon as they've exited the carriage, expertly leading him to the children's quarters.

At these sort of events, he tells Dio, the children are expected to play and make merry until the formal meal. At the dinner table, they are expected to sit with each other and only speak to an adult in dire circumstances. It is only during the ball that the two groups are allowed to interact.

The children have been split according to the sexes, with girls in one room and boys in the other. Jonathan presents both of them to the governess in charge and she signs them in. Then he asks her for the location of the two boys they were paired with for the present exchange. Jonathan's is the quiet ten-year-old in the corner; Dio's has not arrived yet. The gift exchange is to take place between supper and the ball, but the governess generously holds onto their gifts.

Jonathan knows a handful of the other boys, most of them nodding absently in his direction. He drags Dio over to a group of four boys, introducing Dio to be his older cousin, before pulling out a deck of cards and beginning to shuffle. Bridge whist is the game of choice but as there are six of them, they have one pair be scorekeeper and dealer rather than splitting into two teams of three. Dio, being new to this version of the game, loses the first three rounds. He quickly gains momentum however, and he and Jonathan end up taking the set with five wins in a row. By the time they switch out to be scorekeeper and dealer, all the other boys have gathered around their table and many are vying for a chance to play.

Suppertime is called for soon enough (though not before the two of them lose their champion status) and after it, the exchange. Jonathan's recipient is extremely pleased with the custom-made kaleidoscope; Dio's recipient (a moody adolescent boy) is less enthusiastic about the crosswords book. Jonathan receives a set of Indian lithographs and Dio receives a music box set to the tune of Adeste Fidelis.
When the wrapping paper is cleaned up and informal thank-you's are exchanged, half of the candles are extinguished and an orchestra appears from thin air. They start with a popular tune, something to get people talking, before going through the seasonal favorites.

As in the beginning, the boys and girls are immediately segregated, whispering and murmuring and giggling with each other. The married couples take to the floor first, then the newly-engaged, and finally the currently-courting. Despite the thirty-odd couples, there are still a dozen men and women without partners. Mr. Joestar is one of them, but he looks at ease, tapping his cane to the beat of the music and humming offhandedly.

"Hey Dio," Jonathan starts, after all four other boys have left to ask girls to dance, "Are you going to ask someone?"

"Maybe," Dio lies. He has no intention of ingratiating himself with these people.

"Ooh, which one, which one?"

"I don't know."

"Is it that one?" Jonathan presses, pointing to a blond-haired blue-eyed girl.

"No."

"Alright then," he concludes, giving a little sigh of relief, "I'll go ask her to dance then!" He promptly pushes himself off from the corner wall. Dio watches him go over to the girl, taking off his top hat, bowing, and offering his hand. The girl flushes bright red, clearly pleased, and eagerly takes his hand. They help themselves to the outer edges of the dance floor, whirling and twirling completely off-tempo. Dio looks away then, irritated at how Jonathan interacted with similarly wealthy people. Amongst the countryside boys, he never feels like this. They were buffoons who couldn't tell a book from a brick much less write their own name. It is natural for him to lead them. But as for the nobility? The landed lords and ladies whose day-to-day clothes were worth a peasant's life savings? His knee-jerk inferiority makes their presence utterly unbearable.

Seeing Mr. Joestar watch his son bumble through the waltz with pride is the last straw. Dio excuses himself, slipping to the backrooms. He had initially planned on nabbing some leftovers and maybe reading a bit, at least until the next dance (for he had already decided that he would show Jonathan's hapless partner how a proper dance was like), but he catches a glimpse of a group of boys -- with two of Jonathan's playmates included -- creeping single-file into the kitchen.

Dio creeps along as well, mildly curious.

What happens next is all the proof he'll never need for reminding himself that there was no inherent difference of character between the classes.

More than a game or a dare, it is clear the brigade is in the middle of a punishment session. The other boys circle about the weakest one. Dio's gift recipient fills a pitcher halfway. He spits into the pitcher and then passes it to the next boy who does the same.

It is only when the pitcher has been spat into by the whole circle that Dio reveals himself.

"Good evening gentlemen," he announces, lazily throwing open the door. All eight boys freeze. The one in the center looks at him with something akin to hope.

"Get out," his gift recipient sneers, "This is none of your business."
"Of course, of course," Dio replies, sauntering over and popping a leftover teacake into his mouth. "I have no interest in what passes for punishment amongst savages after all."

The challenge works. But of course it does. There's an angry murmur thrumming through the other six boys. The ringleader steps up to bat; his victim is almost smiling.

Dio is smiling too.

"Savages?" the eldest boy scoffs, easily towering over Dio, "Watch your mouth, you orphaned piece of trash. You think we don't know about you? Vivian," he gestures to the boy in the center, "Tell us what you know about Brando here."

"I don't know anything!" the punishee shrieks, covering his face. The eldest neatly kicks him in the stomach.

"When I ask you a question -- you answer, you little piece of shit!"

Those words, that tone; Dio could almost sigh. He's missed that animalistic pitch of cruelty. He reaches forward to still the other boy though, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"What's in there?" he asks, pointing to the set-aside pitcher.

"Spit and juice!" one of the other boys gleefully answers.

Dio chuckles, clutching at his stomach.

"Saliva and fruit juice?" he repeats, adding his own spit into the pitcher, "I take back what I said -- you lot are worse than savages, you're uncreative barbarians."

"What!"

"You bastard!"

"Michael, he won't get away calling us that, will he?"

"What makes you think we're barbarians?" Michael asks, cracking his knuckles.

"Let me show you how things are done in the city," Dio airily says, plucking the pitcher and dumping its contents into the trough. Then he grabs a bottle from the counter, continuing to ignore the other boy's cries of outrage, and pours the fine whiskey until the pitcher is again half full.

"What is he -- "

"Quiet," Michael barks, putting up a hand, "Let's see what tricks this bastard has, eh?"

"I-I-I can't possibly drink this," the boy in the center stammers, even as Dio is forcing his fingers around the pitcher's handle. "I can only have a glass of wine before bed and even then -- "

"Don't be silly," Dio scoffs, "I don't want you to drink it."

"Then -- "

"I want you to piss in it."

There's a beat of silence as the other boys comprehend his loaded suggestion.
"But I can't -- !"

"You can and you will!" Michael laughs, clapping a hand around Dio's shoulder, "Look at you, you're practically pissing your knickers already. Just go ahead and relieve yourself, might as well, right boys?"

It's like the slums all over again -- here in the Earl of Willowby's manor, surrounded by the sons of noblemen. The boys are beside themselves at the idea, stomping their feet and making no effort at keeping quiet, screaming 'Piss, piss, piss!' like wild animals.

One of the boys helps Vivian out of his trousers. And then, with a red and tearful face, he does the deed.

There's uproarious laughter as the boys double back as one, sniggering and pointing at the odd man out.

Dio claps his hands and like obedient children, the others quiet down.

"Now," he says, showing off his white teeth, "You may drink it."

The servants discover the youngest son of Duke Hanscroft's second daughter unconscious on the kitchen floor, naked from the waist down. There are pieces of a broken pitcher scattered around him, and the stench of vomit, urine, and alcohol wafts down the hallway. The incident is quickly hushed up, so much so that the Earl himself never finds out (and the boy's parents will not say for shame) and aided greatly by the boy himself confessing for a wide array of perversions and depravities.

It is no problem, the other boys say to one another, for he is young and there is God. And God will surely set him on the right path. They then make the fig sign with both hands, laughing as only the falsely-exonerated can laugh.

The day after the gala, in preparation for the New Year's Feast, Dio is cornered by Jonathan, who stares at him with blazing eyes.

"Dio!" he hisses, balling his fists, "Why?!

"Why what?"

"Why did you let that happen to Vivian?! I know you were there -- you should have stopped them!"

Whoever had relayed the events to Jonathan had evidently played down Dio's involvement.

"Jojo," Dio starts, batting the other boy's hands aside and rolling his eyes, "Do not mistake me to be you. I have no plans on being a gentleman."

He had been jealous, he can later admit, that some spineless child had received a more expensive present from Jonathan than he, Dio.

"It's what your mother would have wanted!" Jonathan shoots back.

Dio nearly punches him then. He stops his fist at the last second, a hair away from Jonathan's jaw, and slowly retracts it, quickly stepping back.

"Because it's you," he says, mouth contorting into a snarl, "I'll overlook it once. But if you ever tell me what my mother would have wanted from me -- "
His threat goes unfinished for Jonathan punches him in the jaw.

It's a weak punch from a weak boy. Dio is dazed momentarily and he only kicks the other out of reflex. But he, Dio, is not weak and his careless reaction causes Jonathan to crash into the wall. At the other boy's cry of pain, Dio returns to his senses. He rushes towards Jonathan, prodding his shoulder, his back, his stomach. Jonathan's eyes are squeezed shut in pain and Dio finds himself panicking. When it came to fistfights in London, he was in a class of his own.

Jonathan gets over himself in seconds. He lets Dio help him to his feet, and then forcefully pushes the older boy away.

"Get away from me," he hisses.

Dio watches him limp across the hallway, back to his own room.

At a loss for what to say, he lies.

"By the time I got there, he was already unconscious."

Jonathan hears him, that much is certain. He leans against his doorframe to shoot a final glare before slamming the door shut.
Greetings from the Midsummer Fair

Dio gives Jonathan a wide berth in the days following the gala. Jonathan, in turn, steers clear of Dio's way, taking books from the library after curfew to minimize the probability of seeing the other boy. He can put up a front as well, Dio sees, acting as pleasant and enthusiastic as usual during lessons and at the dinner table, whenever he's before his father. The second Mr. Joestar dismisses them however, he's taking the stairs two at a time, throwing open the front doors and sprinting to meet his dog.

For Dio, it is a wretched experience first, because he has no idea how long it will last and second, because he should not care so much. But he does care, he wants the boy he's going to usurp to spend time with him, not his dumb mutt. His is a cyclical annoyance: he's bothered at Jonathan ignoring him, then bothered at himself for caring at all, and then bothered anew because it is the fourth day and Jonathan is still not spending any additional time indoors -- with him.

Up until now, he hasn't realized how accustomed he had gotten to the other boy's company. Now he has to while away afternoons by himself. The books are as interesting and accessible as ever and he devours tome after tome. But when he stumbles upon a particularly ridiculous passage, or even a humorous one-liner, he must swallow his amusement. Jonathan had so been good at deflecting laughter; as it is, he cannot be seen chuckling to himself.

On the evening of the fifth day, there is a knocking on Dio's door.

Dio raises an eyebrow, double-checking the state of his room. Then he sets his book aside and stands up, opening the door to reveal a nervous-looking Jonathan.

"Good evening," Jonathan greets, dipping his head. "May I come in?"

"No," Dio wants very much to spit, 'Who do you think you are, Jonathan Joestar, to snub me from the shadows and then come crawling back at your leisure?'

"Of course," he says instead, opening the door further and granting the other boy entrance. Jonathan sighs, relieved, and sits himself on one of the armchairs. He's holding a sloppily-wrapped parcel, done by his own hands no doubt, and the packaging is a stark contrast to the immaculate ribboned prizes the maids had made for Christmas. Dio goes over to sit in the opposite chair, watching the younger boy place said parcel on the coffee table between them.

"Are you well?" Dio asks, extending the olive branch first. "Your back and shoulder I mean."

"Oh -- that. Yes," Jonathan nods emphatically. He grins lop-sidedly, adding, "You have a good kick."

"So I've been told." He pauses, tossing another scrap of ego to the side, before mumbling, "I'm sorry about that. I should not have... it was not a fair fight."

Jonathan laughs, fully relaxed, and stretches his limbs.

"No, no, I should be the one to apologize," he admits. "I should have asked you for your side of the story. I should not have said your mother's name in vain. I should not have thrown the first punch." Dio can hardly believe his ears. "I spent the week reflecting on my actions and with the coming of the new year, I confess that I am now properly contrite." He certainly looks the part, pushing the parcel forward towards Dio.
"And this is...?"

"A token of apology!" Jonathan replies, beaming. Then he scratches his cheek, "I'm sorry for the state of wrapping... the maids are still away. I had bought it when we planned to celebrate your Name Day but seeing as how your name doesn't have one yet..." he pushes the package again, and Dio picks it up. It is surprisingly heavy, this square box, and he opens it with immeasurable care.

Jonathan's apology to him must have cost the other boy a very pretty penny. It is a set of colored Indian inks, two horsehair brushes, and a thick pad of watercolor paper. He sees Dio's stunned expression and is quick to assume the worst.

"I'm sorry," he reiterates, "I didn't know if you had any interest in this -- I know it's not a very masculine activity but..."

Dio cuts him off, looking up from the present and letting his lips quirk upwards.

"Thank you Jojo," he says, reaching forward to kiss his younger cousin's brow, "I was in need of another hobby."

Jonathan heaves a sigh of relief, relaxed once more.

"Oh, good," he adds, "I was so worried you wouldn't like it! Some of the other boys hate painting you know? They say it's... well." He snatches up the wrapping paper and crumples it into a ball, "Um... that is..."

"Yes?" Dio prompts, looking up from his twirling of the brush.

"When spring comes and the flowers begin to bloom... would you... that is... would you like to come painting with me on a weekend?"

It is Dio's turn to laugh then, throwing the brush and catching it mid-twirl. "You did not need to ask," he chuckles.

"Ah, there's something else too..." Jonathan rifles through his pockets, pulling out a folded piece of paper with tattered postage edges. "Father gave this to me, before he went to fetch you. It's a letter of your mother's, I don't think he has many from her." He sets said letter on the coffee table and gets up, tossing the wrapping paper into the bin. "Happy New Year, Dio!" he says in parting, closing the door upon exiting.

For some time afterwards, Dio remains in his armchair. The brush stills in his motionless hands.

It is only when the grandfather clock strikes twelve that he exits his reverie, reaching for the letter. With trembling hands, he unfolds it, greeted once more with his mother's faultless handwriting.

'Dearest Brother,' the letter begins. It is dated to November 1867 -- a year before his birth -- and talks excitedly about the coming children. She says that her husband ('my beloved Dario', Dio is sickened to read) has already chosen a name for the child, so certain is he that it would be a boy. She frets about how the name Dio is not that of a saint, and how it meant 'God' in Italian to boot, but then confesses to her own visions and hopes for the happiness of her son. She continues with details of the Brando inn, how business was slowed at the moment but would probably pick up with the holiday season, and her hopes that the Joestar shipping business was doing well.

The letter concludes with a never-fulfilled request for their children to meet and play and be friends and confidants as she and her brother had been. In the later stages of pregnancy and with motherhood fast approaching, she admits to missing the countryside greatly, that that sweet air was
certainly the best environment for a child, and hopes that Dario will have enough time to bring them down to the Joestar manor again.

'Your least favourite sister' is scrawled at the bottom, along with his mother's signature.

By the time he's finished the letter, his tears have obscured his mother's handwriting. He is grateful Jonathan gave him his privacy -- though mildly irked that the boy had been withholding the letter for months -- because it would be unacceptable to cry in front of the younger boy. He catches himself quickly, drying his eyes and folding the message back up. He tucks it between the pages of the watercolor paper pad, setting his gifts aside before blowing out the lights.

His pathetic reaction to Jonathan's well-placed (albeit for incorrect reasons) dislike of him is reason enough to draw back from the other boy. It is good he nipped it in the bud, he tells himself, contriving yet another excuse to stay indoors, for there was little point in getting further attached.

Jonathan gives him his distance, amusing himself with his dog and the other children of the village.

By the time the snow has melted and the first sproutings of spring have begun, Jonathan has long forgotten Dio's promise to paint an afternoon away. Dio is relieved here too, spending many a day leaned against the trunk of a tree. The spring breeze is sweet and with it blows a verdant landscape. Painting relaxes him, though he has little eye for composition. Eye-catching colors and absurd dimensions run amok in his pictures. Mr. Joestar offers to hire a proper instructor -- the most of a chastisement the other man has ever given -- but Dio declines the offer.

His relief is short-lived unfortunately, for he soon discovers the explanation behind Jonathan's continued absence.

The blond-haired blue-eyed girl which the Joestar heir had danced with at the Boxing Day Ball turns out to be the only daughter (and indeed, youngest child) of the town's medical practitioner. Their second meeting is like fate and Jonathan is immediately taken with her.

Although Dio makes every effort to avoid looking at them, he finds it neigh impossible as they are absolutely everywhere. Splashing each other on the riverbank, carving their names into tree trunks, even scandalously sharing the same carriage on the Russian mountain cart at the midsummer fair!

He alludes as much to the Viscount over dinner in the hopes that Jonathan would be more discrete or -- even better -- the Viscount would put a stop to it. Neither expectation ends up panning out, instead, Jonathan launches into a delighted retelling of their latest excursion into the village, and his father only encourages him, noting that he should buy the girl a trinket once per month at the least to declare his continued interest in her.

And then Jonathan is wheedling Dio to come to the village to look for an appropriate trinket for the wretched Erina Pendleton.

Dio could vomit.

He holds it back of course, giving a tight-lipped smile and grudgingly switching Jonathan's garish soldier figurine for something more palatable, a princess doll or the like.

When he ends up dreaming about being the best man at Jonathan's wedding, he wakes with a shout, hand clamping over his own mouth. He forces himself back down, slowing his breaths, and trying to see past the red. He cannot for there is nothing to see. The resentment he had felt towards the dance instructor, the Duke's grandson, and even Mr. Joestar returns with a vengeance. He knows that such sentiments are not only ridiculous but socially unacceptable, but he does not care.
For it is he who plans, no, who will *have* Jonathan's everything: his title, his lands, his property, and it makes sense for the boy to be part and parcel. His life will be Dio's to take, after all.

Yes, the resentment is the same. But the intensity he feels it on is a different scale entirely.

Come Friday and Jonathan is going to the fairgrounds for a second time. Dio asks the Viscount for a means of transport into London, making up some excuse of wanting to see the city, and the Viscount graciously arranges for a carriage. He plans to procure a stronger version of the poison he had fed his father; his dedicated saving of allowance for months meant that he now had ten times the capital to work with. On the way to the East Asian apothecary however, he comes across a vile sight in a backalley.

An impression is all he gets: a carriage trots by and after it passes, the prostitute and her customer and his pet have disappeared into the shadows.

Had his eyed deceived him, he wonders. Perhaps it had been a trick of the light, nothing more. Nonetheless, he finds himself sickly curious -- there is something wrong with him, he finally understands, for no normal person would find *inspiration* in a scene like that.

When he returns from London, he is only five pence poorer. The item he had purchased had normally been sold in bulk, used primarily for the hunts of foxes. He needs only an ounce or two of course, for it is not a fox he is planning on hunting.

The following week is spent in preparation. He needs an accomplice, someone who will ready the trigger. The countryside boys are wrapped around his finger at the point; he picks the smallest of the bunch and hands him a vial, giving careful instruction that if any of it touched his the Joestar heir, there would be hell to pay.

With the trap set, he sits back and waits.

Sure enough, when the weekend rolls around, Jonathan once again announces that he will going to the fairgrounds with the girl. It is the last week of the fair, and though they've been twice, it seems neither of them have had their fill of the rides. Dio adds his own encouragements on top of the Viscount's, and goes to sleep with a smile.

Jonathan is off the next morning. Dio borrows a horse from the stables on the pretense of a quick morning ride, going instead to the village boy's house. The poor thing is trembling and he does not even know why. Dio clucks his tongue, pulling him onto the mare's back. They race at breakneck speeds to the fairgrounds, where he watches the child successfully trip and splash most of the liquid on the backside of the Pendleton girl's dress.

The child is in tears, on his hands and feet, desperately apologizing for spilling medicine. He is pulled up by a furious Jonathan and pardoned by a smiling Erina, who not only forgives him, but gives him her handkerchief to dry his own shirt. Jonathan looks at her, absolutely smitten, and as Dio is sending the child back home, he sees the countryside boy wearing a similar expression.

He kicks his heels and guides the mare back to the Joestar manor, where the servants welcome him for lunch. Afterwards, he asks Mr. Joestar for permission to go the fairgrounds as well. He doesn't even need to explain himself; the Viscount gladly arranges another carriage.

Dio has immersed himself so well, the servants know that to question him is to question the son of a Viscount. And so it is that the driver either turns a blind eye or holds his tongue. Either way, he does not mention how odd it is for Dio to be bringing Danny along.
Going by carriage is noticeably slower; it takes the pair of horses nearly an hour to reach the fairgrounds. By the time Dio is thanking the driver and leading the dog towards the tracks, the sun is on the cusp of setting. Jonathan had blathered at length about his plans for the day, how he would kiss Erina for the first time on the Russian mountains, hopefully as the sun was setting. And Dio had paid special attention, planning all the while.

It is just as Jonathan had said: come late afternoon and he and the girl were queued up for the miniature mountain railroad. Danny makes an effort at greeting his owner, yanking on his leash and pawing fitfully at the floor, but the ill-fitting muzzle Dio had snatched from the stables keeps him from actually barking. Dio drags the dog behind a curtain, keeping an ironhold on the leash while rolling his sleeves up.

In retrospect, he should have brought gloves.

He makes a face, biting his lower lip, before getting to a crouch and feeling around the dog's nether regions. He regards the act of forcibly arousing the canine with a similar amount of distaste to listening to Jonathan prattle on about love. Which is to say he wanted to throw up.

Thankfully, the dog is soon rutting against his hand, drooling like the stupid poorly-tamed beast it was. Dio stands up and wipes his hand against the curtain, double-checking Jonathan's location.

Then he unfastens the muzzle and tosses it to the side, loosening his hold on the leash. Danny sprints forward, barking like mad, and right when Jonathan's head turns, he lets go of the leash.

It is only due to immense self-restraint that he refrains from smiling or laughing.

No, more than that, he manages to look appropriately shocked.

But as for what happens next -- oh, it is better than he had dreamed.

With a joyous shout, Jonathan calls for his dog, kneeling down with arms wide open. Danny dashes forward, ignoring his owner entirely. He crashes into a surprised Erina, nosing against the now-dry rump of her skirt, before clambering on top of her shoulders and thrusting his hips.

It is absolute madness. Erina's shrieks, Danny's howls, Jonathan's screams, all drowned out by the spectator's laughs. Jonathan tries to pry his dog off; he is rewarded with a bleeding hand courtesy of a furious bite.

Tapping into an unknown well of strength, Erina manages to throw the dog off, getting to her feet. Danny returns with a vengeance, biting and barking and snapping.

"Erina!" Jonathan hollers, voice carrying through the cacophony.

She hears him and reaches for him, but it is too late. Danny has pushed her to the edge of the platform. She takes one step backwards and understandably loses her balance, falling into the tracks below.

Does Jonathan scream further? He must, knowing him. The details are lost on Dio.

It doesn't matter; the train makes its final loop, mauling both girl and dog, and only then does Dio step out of the crowd, kindly reaching forward to cover his younger cousin's eyes.
This is what had been expected: Jonathan's dog would have rutted against the girl in public, shaming Jonathan and humiliating her. She would naturally be furious towards Jonathan, Jonathan would be utterly mortified, and their relationship would become irreparable. Perhaps her family would even move out of town in an attempt to preserve her dignity. Either way, there was little chance their romance would be allowed to continue. Dio had hoped, however slightly, that Jonathan would resent his dog for destroying his relationship and perhaps move to have the hound put down. It was a bit of stretch of course, the boy couldn't be called upon to hurt a fly, but still within the realm of possibility.

This is what happens instead: Danny rutts against the girl with such enthusiasm, biting Jonathan in his attempts to get him off, that he sends himself (along with Erina) tumbling into the train tracks below. Although Jonathan (or perhaps some like-minded spectator) attempts to get the fairground manager to intervene, the timing is too perfect -- the Russian mountain cart is already descending and there is nothing to stop its path. Girl and dog are both crushed underneath the chains of its wheels, leaving a mangled mess of blood, flesh, and bone for the vulture-like public to descend upon. The manager is called for but there is nothing he can do. He is a businessman at heart: he first orders the mess to be cleaned up, then spreads some money to hush up the nearby reporters, and only after does he ask for the victim's friends and family.

Dio understands that the situation came to be primarily from dumb luck. That the possibility of the girl dying had not factored into his plans. He understands this perfectly, but it does not stop him from feeling like God -- as if the timepiece of the world was in accordance with his whims. In that moment, when he covers Jonathan's eyes with one hand and pulls him close with the other, he feels nothing short of glee. This is how the world should be, he thinks, whispering sweet nothings into his cousin's ear. Jonathan is struggling, gasping for air like a madman, but he is a softhearted boy through and through and Dio restrains him with little real effort.

When the mess has been cleaned up and the reporters have been pushed away, only then does the fairground manager approach them. Though Jonathan has stilled considerably by then, his voice is still caught in his throat and Dio subsequently needs to do all the talking. Yes, they were related, yes, Jonathan was the heir of Lord Joestar, no, the Viscount was not at the fair. Yes, Jonathan had come with the girl, her name is -- was -- Erina Pendleton and she was the only daughter of the village doctor. Yes, the dog was Jonathan's, no, Jonathan had not come with it. Yes, it had gotten checked for rabies, no, Dio has no idea why it acted like that. For, as he explains, it had always been such a sweet, obedient, well-trained dog. It had even saved its master from drowning, he adds.

The manager sees that Jonathan is in no state to recall the events, then remembers that he is the Viscount's eldest son and falls back into his place. A black carriage is arranged to transport the two of them back to manor. A second carriage will follow them, as soon as the workers have separated the corpses. The manager has reassured them that he will personally break the news to the Pendletons, that the boys have had a tiring enough day as it is and are in need of some rest.

It is only when the carriage door opens that Dio takes his hand off of Jonathan's face. He gently helps the other boy up, closing the door when they are both seated. The driver's whip cracks, the horses whinny, and then, they are off.

Jonathan's face is ghastly. The white pallor gripping his cheeks makes the specks of blood stand out all the more. Gingerly, Dio pulls out his own handkerchief, dabbing away. He pulls away soon after for the specks have already dried.
He observes Jonathan for the whole of the ride back, looking for what, he does not know. Outside of the jarring caused by the carriage, Jonathan makes no effort to move. Everything about him is still, from his fingers to his lips. He must be blinking, Dio thinks, though he never catches it.

"Dio," Jonathan whispers, as the carriage approaches the manor, "What happened?"

It was possible for Jonathan to forget, Dio realizes. The boy was only in his thirteenth year. There would likely be further dalliances, more girls for him to push under carriage wheels.

"Jonathan," he says, taking the boy's face in his hands right as the vehicle came to a lurching halt, "Remember this moment. Remember it well. Let her live on in your memories, in your heart."

A messenger must have been sent ahead of them, for the Viscount himself is dashing from the manor and throwing open the carriage doors. He takes his shell-shocked son and equally-upset nephew into his arms, patting their heads and whispering platitudes.

"Father," Jonathan asks at a later time.

"Father, why would God allow for this?"

"Jonathan," his father replies, wrapping his arms about the boy, "When my dear Mary... that is, when your mother died, I asked myself that question everyday. And even now, when I know you will grow into a fine gentleman and make both of us very proud, I still ask the same question. Why would God allow for her to die? Why would God allow for you to grow up without a mother?"

"And?" his son prompts, "Have you found an answer?"

"There some questions that have no answer,' his father does not say. Does not say because he sees the deep-seated need for closure in his son's eyes.

"Perhaps," he says instead. "You must find your own answer of course, but as for myself, I believe that there were people in Heaven who wished to see her more. I believe that we will meet again and I hope I will still be a man that can look her in the eye."

"Grief," he goes on to say, "Is the price we pay for love."

Whether Jonathan understands or comes to his own conclusion, he does not know. But his son kisses him on the cheek and thanks him, leaving his father by the fireside.

On the evening of the tragedy, a deacon from a neighboring parish is called to hail at the Joestar manor. He counsels both boys, first together and then one-on-one. Dio goes through the motions, Jonathan does not. The deacon stays with Dio for maybe ten minutes. He is alone with Jonathan for nearly an hour. When the Reverend exits the room, Jonathan forgoes supper, heading straight to his room. Dio, who has been waiting in the nearby parlor, lingers in his seat.

"I'm sorry for calling you out like this," Mr. Joestar apologizes.

"Do not be," the Reverend replies, shaking his head. "It is I who should be sorry. Children are not meant to witness to such things."

"But are they alright?" the Viscount presses, "Are their spirits sound?"
"Your nephew? Certainly. He seems to have made his peace. But as for your son..." he shakes his head, making the cross with one hand. "I cannot say."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing?"

"I sat with him for an hour, bandaging his hand. And for an hour, he said nothing."

"Did he... did he cry?"

"Not a tear."

"Good Lord..." he whispers, making the cross as well. "Reverend, how do I right this wrong? I was the one who bought him that dog. I thought the boy could do with a companion -- he seemed so skittish around the other boys. Never would I have thought that..."

"Lord Joestar, you of all people should know that there is a reason for all. Your son has much empathy and it is nothing to be ashamed of. In time, I am sure he will learn to keep it at bay. As it is, I have told him to read the initial scriptures again, when the Holy Father himself would take life from his creations for what was then thought to be a whim. Perhaps knowing that others before him have suffered will ease his sense of loss."

"Thank you Reverend. A carriage has been called."

"You are as gracious as ever, Lord Joestar. Do not falter in your faith, your son will look to you for guidance. Do not hesitate to call upon me, especially if the boy continues to be in poor humor after a month. On that note, I would prescribe three weeks of melancholy, to be used as the child sees fit."

"And what of the girl's funeral? Shall I allow him to go?"

"I believe," the Reverend concludes, "That the child is capable of deciding for himself."

Mr. Joestar sends the deacon to the door before calling Dio for supper. Feeling any attempt at amusement would be in poor taste, the silence of the meal is punctuated with the tinkle of silverware. Dio finishes dessert and excuses himself after, and the Viscount bids him goodnight.

Dio gives Jonathan his space the next day. The boy leaves the room twice, both times to use the bathroom, and neither time does his gaze pass over his older cousin, tucked away in the corner. Mr. Joestar, in seeing his son's sadness, remembers his own display of grief, and allows him to go without food for a second evening. On the second day, the servants leave a tray filled with the boy's favorite foods at the front of his door. The tray goes untouched.

On the third day, fearing dehydration or worse, unconsciousness, Dio throws open the other boy's door. Jonathan is lying on the bed, eyes wide open, and his clothes are in disarray. Dio ignores the state of everything, pulling the other boy up and onto his feet and leading him down the stairs. Jonathan, in turn, ignores him. He allows himself to be led to the dining room, but when Dio is pressing a spoonful of porridge to his lips, he turns his head, making a move to leave.

"Don't be such a brat," Dio snarls, "Do you think she wanted you to starve?"

Jonathan pulls his wrist out of Dio's grasp, saying nothing and continuing forward. He gets as far
as the family heirloom statue before Dio grabs his shoulder, whirling his around.

"I know I told you to remember the moment, but I didn't mean -- " 

"I have just lost my best friend and the girl I wanted to marry," Jonathan interrupts, nailing him with a deadened gaze. "Do you think I am grieving because you told me to?"

"What grief?" Dio spits, "I haven't seen you shed a single -- " 

Again, he is interrupted by Jonathan's punch. This time, he lets himself be hit. One, two, three punches, to the face.

"Who do you think you are," Jonathan growls. He doesn't get to finish either, for Dio knocks the wind out of him.

"Come, then," the elder commands, putting his own fists up, "Let me give you a taste of actual sorrow."

With a cry that is more monster than man, Jonathan Joestar throws himself forward, giving a swift and useless volley of fists. Dio blocks each and every one, not even needing to dodge, and easily retaliates with a well-placed jab of his own. The younger boy is knocked back against the wall, head smacking against the stone wall hanging, but he wipes the blood from his chin and pushes himself back up, launching himself yet again.

Three times. Dio sends him flying three times and time times more, Jonathan rights himself. By the fourth time, Dio feels slightly winded, but the fight has not left the other boy's eyes. If anything, it has grown. He runs forward for a fourth time, kicking Dio in his unguarded ankles and shoving him to the ground. In a state of shock, Dio concedes to being pinned for a second. And then he's kneeing Jonathan in the chest and they're kicking and punching across the entranceway's floor.

It is ridiculous, he later thinks, that some utterly inexperienced son of a rural nobleman could fight him to a draw.

No, more than that, it is humiliating that Jonathan could best him.

"Nothing -- has -- been -- the -- same!" Jonathan roars, punctuating each word with a punch. He grabs at Dio's lapels, ignoring the hands squeezed about his neck, and continues, "My father, the villagers, my friends, Erina, Danny -- you've taken everything from me!"

Thinking back, it was certainly an accusation stemming from anger. The irony of course is that Jonathan is right, more right than he'll ever believe.

Dio is angry too, angry at being beaten to the point of tears, angry at giving a damn about the other boy, and he gladly screams back.

"I never wanted any of it! You think you're in bad straights?! Try losing both parents and then -- "

"At least you knew your mother!"

"At least your mother didn't die apologizing!"

"I'm tired of you always being -- "

"You think it's easy?! I'm older than you, you wretched child!"

Their shouting match is cut short by the stone mask clattering to the floor and extending its spikes.
They stare at it, and then one another, and then Mr. Joestar comes rushing from his study and pulls them apart. They're both panting hard, bleeding from the nose and mouth, and garments in a similar state of shambles. He gives another spiel about the importance of fair fighting and how horseplay should never be taken too far, and then sends them to their rooms.

Dio is angry, so angry, he genuinely considers leaving the other boy to die. He does not approach him for another three days, and would have ignored him for a week (or better yet, the rest of his life) had Mr. Joestar not mentioned remorsefully over dinner that the Pendleton girl's funeral was to be held the following day. The Joestars had received an invitation of course, and Mr. Joestar himself had already brought flowers, but he did not know if Jonathan was in any state of mind to attend.

But as for Dio, his reasoning is thus: he, Dio, can accept coming in second place, provided that first place was dead. In order to guarantee that, he needs to elevate the girl's position in Jonathan's heart to an unreachable peak. Only then will Jonathan never allow for another and only then would Jonathan be left with him.

So he sets aside his ire, saving it for a later day, and enters Jonathan's room the next morning. The maids have patched his face up, at least, so that it is no longer swollen. But his cheeks still have that sickly shade of white and he's refused to change out of his tattered garments.

He takes one glance at Dio and scowls.

"Get out."

"No," Dio replies, crossing the threshold and pulling him up again. Jonathan wrenches himself free, glaring vehemently.

"Shut up! Get out! Go away!"

"I would like nothing better, believe me," Dio lies, dodging an already-faltering punch. "But the girl's funeral is today and I know you will hate yourself for not going."

"...What?" Jonathan asks.

His younger cousin looks like a wounded animal with his wide eyes and mutely-drawn limbs.

"You heard me," Dio huffs, holding out his hand. "Now come on. Your father has called for a carriage, you have an hour to get ready."

Jonathan's hand is so very cold. He is trembling like a leaf when Dio pulls him up, and is trembling still when Dio is dressing him in newly-purchased mourning garb. Mr. Joestar sits in the carriage with them, head bowed and hands clasped in prayer.

The condition of the girl's corpse meant that the casket needed to be closed. She is brought to the graveyard on her brothers' shoulders. Her parents trail three paces behind, and with them, the rest of the procession.

A July funeral is no good, Dio thinks, while his hand is clasped fiercely around Jonathan's. There is no rain or snow to be had, and it is as if nature is rejoicing in the child's passing. Mr. and Mrs. Pendleton retain their composure, up until the point where the handful of dirt is thrown. The mother loses it then, falling to her knees and giving a mournful wail, and needs to be helped indoors by her husband.

He will not kill Jonathan in the summer, he concludes. No, for his younger cousin, a spring burial.
would be most fitting.

Mr. Joestar takes it upon himself to help the Pendletons in the aftermath. As such, the two boys end up riding home together.

"Thank you," Jonathan whispers, smiling weakly. "Thank you -- and I'm sorry. For saying all that. I didn't mean it. I was..."

Dio silences him, reaching forward to stroke his cousin's soft dry cheek.

"It helps," he starts, "To cry, that is."

Jonathan bites his bottom lip, shaking his head.

"No. No, Dio, please."

"The darker the night," Dio recites, moving his hand to rest at the back of Jonathan's head, "The brighter the stars."

"Dio -- " Jonathan sobs, "Dio, no."

"And the deeper the grief -- the closer is God."

When the carriage returns to the manor, Dio's left shoulder is damp with tears.
A week after the funeral of Erina Pendleton, Mr. Joestar arranges an additional burial service, this time for his son's companion of eight years. Although Danny (or what could be scavenged of him) had already been buried in the family graveyard, proper services had not been performed. It is truly ridiculous, Dio finds himself thinking, when he is dressing himself in black and holding onto his younger cousin's hand yet again, how much power the wealthy had. He remembers scraping together every cent in the flat to expedite his mother's funeral -- a futile endeavor when there were clearly clergymen being paid in gold to send off deceased pets of the peered elite!

Instead of the deacon, a proper prebendary has been called for. He is also from the same parish, albeit a more elevated position, and he keeps a completely straight-if-not-solemn face throughout the ceremony.

Jonathan's eyes are closed and he has taken his hand out of Dio's grasp, clasping left with right in prayer. When the prebendary throws the dirt over the already-covered grave, Jonathan draws the cross, teeth scraping against his unused hand.

Had the prebendary been paid a pretty penny? Was he simply giving his respects to the son of a Viscount? For it was, after all, a title bestowed upon the Joestars by the voice of God himself. Well, whatever the reason for his lingering even after Mr. Joestar and the servants had departed, Dio refuses to believe a man of the church would care so much over some sniveling child's addle-minded mutt.

"My child," the prebendary addresses, when it is just him and the two boys, "Even in Forsith-on-Becking we have heard of the amity shared between yourself and your dog. That such unconditional friendship could be experienced at your age, surely it is something to smile upon?"

"It is, it is," Jonathan agrees, rubbing at his eyes and nose.

"Then tell me," the man of church urges, "What is it that troubles you? What keeps you from making peace with your friend's passing?"

'It is a dumb dog,' Dio wants very much to spit out, 'Do we mourn for every butchered cow and pig? There are people whose bodies are dumped into ditches -- or worse, into the River Thames -- and you men of God and letters are sitting around here mourning for a dog?!' He doesn't of course, he doesn't even clench his fists. Instead, he schools his expression into a suitably sympathetic visage, gaze switching between cousin and clergyman.

"Father," Jonathan murmurs, "Father, please forgive me my insolence, but I have heard it mentioned that..." he pauses, licking his lips, "That it is impossible to see Danny in Heaven for he is no human. And now, when I think of his soul wandering the earth for all eternity... or perhaps being sent to Hell on default... I just -- "

At this point, he cries anew and the prebendary allows him to do so, going so far as to pull the thirteen-year-old boy into his chest. Dio makes an apologetic face; the prebendary gently shakes his head. Does he expect Dio to go? Dio does not know, but he will not.

Eventually, Jonathan's tears stem and he wipes furiously at his face, abashedly apologizing for the embarrassing display of heart.

"I'm sorry," he stammers, "It was not my place to ask, I should not have, please do not condemn me
"Father!"

"My child," the prebend sighs, "In these quickly-changing times, when the wonders of Innovation and Science allow us to grasp at certainty, I must profess that I am neither inventor nor scientist."

He takes a step back then, pulling out a chain of bright blue prayer beads, and grips them between forefinger and thumb. "You see, because of Mr. Newton's work, we can safely conclude that, if I dropped these beads one hundred times, for one hundred times they would return to the earth. There is beauty in such simplicity, but alas, we cannot understand all with his methods."

Jonathan nods devoutly.

"There are men who spend their lives studying God's word, hoping to find a surefire way to Heaven. But a method has yet to be found, and experiments have provided inconclusive results. This is where we of the church would differ from the men of laws and numbers: for where they deem the burden of proof to exist, the church believes that existence is proof enough." He laughs then, lightly ruffling Jonathan's hair. "Regarding your question, I cannot say with certainty either way. I have not been to Heaven myself. But when I do, and God willing, it is before the two of you, I believe I should chance upon this dear old friend of yours."

Lies. Lies, lies, lies. Dio wants to accuse the prebendary of having forsaken the Bible -- no, he wants to call out blasphemy. Animals could not gain entrance to the kingdom of Christ, that was why humans had been created to tame the things.

But Jonathan is greatly reassured, relaxing entirely and dropping to his knees. He kisses the prebendary's hem in an overt show of gratitude and Dio needs to restrain himself from pulling the other boy up.

"Thank you," Jonathan repeats, "Thank you, thank you."

The Monday after the dog's funeral marks the resuming of their weekday lessons. Jonathan falls back into patterns from before the New Year, when he and Dio had struck a sort of camaraderie, and Dio is unable to push his younger cousin away. No, more than that, he relishes in his company, congratulating himself on a job well done. For if Jonathan were to spend every afternoon of every day with him, whether it was on the balcony or in the library, before the fireplace or in the parlor, he would gladly stain his hands with the blood of dozens of girls and dogs.

More than sticking like a burr however, Jonathan is like a specter, bound to drift between the walls of the manor. Case in point, when the harvest festival has come around the village markets are flooded with sweet fruit pastries and savory cured meats, Jonathan has no inclination of attending. Outside of going to church on Sunday, he never strays further than the courtyard.

Dio thinks to ask many a time of course, but he does not. He has his limits too, namely, how much false sympathy he could dredge up for the other boy's grief.

The problem then, rests in how the month of melancholy prescribed by the reverend had somehow stretched into a season. When the leaves on the countryside trees begin to change color and even when they've all fallen off, Jonathan never strays further than than a dozen paces. Though the color has returned to his cheeks, though he is eating well and making remarkably good progress on subjects outside of historical warfare, Dio finds the other disconcertingly fragile, a house of cards molded into a boy.

The coming and going of All Hallow's Night marks a full year since his arrival at the Joestar estate. More importantly, it marks four months since Jonathan's loss. Dio decides that enough is enough then and, on the pretense of doing some early Christmastime shopping, drags his younger cousin into town.
Throughout the carriage ride, Jonathan is all tight-lipped smiles and trembling hands. 'Be at ease,' Dio remembers himself saying. Had he held the other boy's hand then? Probably. Regardless, there was no one around to see. When the carriage stops and the driver lets them off, Jonathan is like a newly-born foal, wide-eyed, skittish, and so very uncertain. He's truly sticking to Dio like a burr, and Dio lets him, maneuvering them towards the markets and shops.

Unfortunately for him, Jonathan's reclusivity had led to Dio making few trips into the village. As such, the village boys had reordered and regrouped and their current head, by the looks of the gang of four who accost them in mid-afternoon, is the older brother of the terrified child Dio had sent to spill dog urine over the girl. The younger sibling reveals himself shortly, throwing himself at Jonathan in a mess of tears and fists. He is still enamoured with the girl by the sound of it, and he blames himself for her death.

Dio kicks him back and beats the rest of them into the ground. Then he has to turn back because Jonathan is starting to wail, nails scrabbling against the cobblestones and reciting a chorale of misapprehended confessions.

He pulls his younger cousin up yet again and drags the two of them to the carriage depot. They end up returning to the manor within hours with no purchases to show for their time.

Later that evening, after supper had been cleared and Jonathan had been tucked miserably into bed, Dio knocks on the door to the Viscount's study.

"Come in. Ah, Dio, what an unusual event." Mr. Joestar sets aside his books and papers, getting up and moving to the coffee table. He motions for the boy to sit down. "Would you like some milk? Cakes? I haven't any here but I could ring up the maids."

"No thank you," Dio replies, slipping into the chair, "I'm still full."

"Alright then." Mr. Joestar sits down as well. "Now then, what can I do for you?"

For a second, Dio imagines himself to be an acrobat from the circus. His is thin and fine rope, suspended dozens of yards above the unforgiving ground. He has been walking it for the better part of a year, and the end is nowhere in sight. The moment passes and he takes a deep breath, summoning the nerve to look the Viscount in the eye.

"Father," he begins, knowing Mr. Joestar enjoyed the title, "I am worried."

"Worried?" the older man's eyebrows furrow. "Worried about what?"

"Well... it is not concerning myself, but Jojo. He hasn't been the same and although he is better..."

"Hmmm yes, I can see that," the Viscount nods, "But the Reverend has said some residual melancholy is perfectly normal. And Jojo, as you know, has always been soft-hearted."

"But it's been months," Dio presses, "We went to village today. It was the first time Jojo had been since the Midsummer fair. He only leaves the manor on Sunday and only leaves for church." He clenches his fists and averts his gaze. He makes his lower lip tremble, continuing with, "I fear that the countryside has too many memories."

Mr. Joestar does not respond. Dio chances a glance upwards; the Viscount looks strangely lost.

But he has a goal in-mind, and so he propels the conversation forward.

"He met with the other villagers today and remembered. Remembered what was lost. That was
why we came back early. It was not, as Jonathan said over supper, that the wares had been sold out.” He clasps his hands and looks up again. "Father, I don't believe I've told you, but I'm extremely grateful to you. Not only because you gave me a place to live and an education, but also because you came to London when you did. I do not..." his voice falters then, as his confession veers on the precipice of truth, "I would not have been able to stay in London, the memory of my parents is more than I can bear."

Still yet, the older man holds his peace.

"I believe that Jojo is reminded to a similar degree, and this reminiscence is prolonging his melancholy. Therefore, I came today to ask if it would be possible to -- "

The fruit doesn't fall far from the tree, Dio learns, in that Mr. Joestar, despite being a fully grown man (and a nobleman at that) is not above interrupting others. He doesn't fall back to violence however, standing up and throwing his arms around his nephew.

Dio freezes up, unused to the sudden contact. He is quick to calm himself and slow to return the embrace.

Mr. Joestar is the one to end it, clearing his throat and backing off. Because he's on his knees -- entirely unbecoming of his position -- Dio can see the other man's eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Dio," the Viscount begins, "You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that. I had worried for so long that you would resent me, that you would never acclimate to a life outside London. Thank you for looking after Jojo, I see now that I haven't paid as much attention as I should." He kisses Dio's brow and goes back to his seat, pulling out a handkerchief to dab at his eyes, "You are correct of course, and I confess that both Father and Reverend have advised me on a similar course of action. I was scared, even now, I fear sending the boy out on his own." He looks at Dio then, positively doleful, "Dio, would you be amenable to attending the same boarding school as Jojo?"

'Would you pledge your life to be a servant to my son,' Dio hears. But it is his checkmate and he doesn't care what misconceptions the other man has. With effort, he keeps the smile from his face, dipping his head with in an appropriately reverent fashion.

"Of course," he murmurs, "I would fear for his safety otherwise."

"Thank you," Mr. Joestar sighs, leaning back and rubbing his temples, "It is a great relief to me. I will call some of my friends up, see if there are any free spaces at the moment."

'I should be the one to thank you,' Dio does not say. He bids the Viscount good-night instead, closing the door to the study and making his way up the grand staircase. His senses are ringing and he can almost feel the blood rushing through his veins. The prospect of having Jonathan to himself and isolating him further... it is exciting, to say the least. He is almost tempted to rouse the other boy, just to share the good news, but manages to contain himself. For the night, at least.

Come morning and Mr. Joestar makes the announcement. Jonathan is surprised, to say the least, and Dio fears that he will resist. He does not, thankfully, and only asks for the expected date of departure. Mr. Joestar laughs, saying that the mailman had yet to come, and adds that they would leave the manor after the New Year at the earliest.

With a quickness that is available only to nobles, a family friend manages to secure two spots for the Joestar boys at a school on the southern coastline, a week's coach ride from the manor. The air is clear and the surrounding countryside is marvelous, Mr. Joestar adds, and Dio knows the man is
hoping it's enough of a change to sooth his son's soul.

Christmas and Boxing Day fly by. Dio gives Jonathan a set of colored landscapes, painted in the Romanticist style which he knew the other boy adored. Jonathan, in turn, gives Dio a personal stamp and seal with the initials 'DB' beautifully carved into the wood. They are invited to another gala, one without a children's gift exchange, and Dio is immensely pleased to see Jonathan refusing every dance at the ball.

Sure enough, New Year's Eve comes and goes. This time, it is the three of them by the fireside, alternating between bridge and charades. He has spent two birthdays in his mother's childhood residence, he realizes. He reiterates his promise, if only to himself, that he will be the one to inherit the estate, and allows Mr. Joestar to wish him a happy fifteenth birthday.

A long-distance carriage comes for them on the third of January. Both father and son are more than a little tearful; Mr. Joestar gives Dio an old photograph of his mother and Jonathan the Stone Mask. He then reassures both boys that they were welcome to come back -- to come home -- at the drop of a hat if the new location proved unpalatable. But, he insists, there was a great deal to be learned in interacting with other people. He hugs and kisses them good-bye, leaving his son a blubbering mess.

Once more, Dio muses, it is the two of them in carriage. The driver has been instructed to make frequent stops and prioritize the boys' comfort.

"Thirteen years," his younger cousin whispers.

"What?"

"For fourteen years, so long as Father was home, he made sure to eat dinner with me. Even when he sent me to bed hungry, he would always ask the cook to make a big breakfast."

"It is natural to be homesick at first," Dio admits.

"Were you?" Jonathan prods.

Instead of answering, Dio snorts and pinches the other boy's nose. Jonathan warbles, caught between a laugh and a cry.

The first night they pull up to a roadside inn, Jonathan shakes him awake in the middle of the night. Dio's eyes snap open and he nearly fails to hold himself back, so strong was the instinct to lunge, to defend, to hurt.

"...What is it?" he asks instead, blinking rapidly in an attempt to adjust his eyes.

"I've decided," Jonathan says. His eyes are glowing.

"Decided what?"

"That I'm going to be a gentleman."

"You woke me up for this?" Dio growls, turning over.

"No, I mean, it's even more important now. I want to be someone who will live well, who will be able to meet Erina and Danny again in Heaven. So even though I'm not a good student, I'm going to try my best." His voice is so earnest, Dio wants to puke. "You're the same too, aren't you, Dio?"
"Go to sleep Jojo," he sighs. Then he pulls the pillow over his face, just for good measure.

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An Approach of Carrot and Stick
End of Part I: Childhood (1881-1883)
Jonathan presses his face against the window, giving an appreciative 'ahhh' at the sight of the school. The single spire of the cathedral towers over the snow-covered countryside and the gloomy winter light takes little from its façade. Dio ignores his cousin, loudly turning to the next page, but Jonathan pulls him over soon enough so that both of them can see the fast-approaching school-and-church setting.

The school at Chichester is not officially a school -- this is, Dio learns, so that they are not required to hire lecturer or pick pupils from the riff-raff and instead subsist entirely on tuition-come-donations -- but it has all the trappings of education coupled with more particulars than the other public schools. There is time yet to learn of the school's history, for the moment, Jonathan simply stares wide-eyed at the enormous entrance. The church back home had had a pair of beautifully glazed windows; the cathedral at Chichester has a dozen -- and then some.

"Welcome," a man of the church intones as two servants hold open the doors. Four additional servants scurry out to take the luggage. "Misters Brando and Joestar, am I correct?"

"Yes!" Jonathan replies, nodding enthusiastically. Dio grunts.

"Very good. I am Father Harcourt, one of the three prebendaries of this cathedral. The good Viscount wrote that you would be arriving anytime between the tenth and twelfth. I am glad that your journey seems to have proceeded unhindered." He excuses himself for a moment to speak with the driver. Jonathan is looking left and right, up and down, eyes wide at the immenseness of the church. Dio is doing the same thing, but with more restrained motions. He refuses to look like a drooling dog.

"It's so big..." Jonathan murmurs.

"Hn."

Normally, Jonathan is alright with his cousin's lack of enthusiasm. But this time, his own awe insists otherwise. "I mean, have you seen anything bigger? It think it's twice as tall as our home! And those windows!" He reaches up, grasping pointlessly, and Dio huffs.

"Of course I've seen larger cathedrals. I come from London, remember?" Sure, he hadn't gone into said churches, much less been admitted pupilship, but it didn't mean they didn't exist.

Jonathan opens his mouth, but his reply is cut short by the prebendary's return.

"The help will take your luggage into the storehold. The Dean is currently in a meeting, but he will see you shortly. In the meantime, please follow me into the waiting room." He leads the boys out the entrance, veering left and left again. They go past the central lawn, through the cloisters, and into the start of the school buildings. They stop at a small abode covered with ivy which the prebendary unlocks. It is a quaint room, sparsely-furnished but already lit with a half-dozen candles. "After you," he says, motioning to the boys. Jonathan steps in and Dio follows suit.

"Please, sit," the Father requests. "Here is some tea and some biscuits while you wait. The meeting should be half-done by now so the dean will come see you shortly. Unfortunately, I must see to the other children, but I trust you will behave yourselves?"

Jonathan nods vigorously; Dio gives one curt tilt.
"Good." The prebendary nods as well. He turns to leave, but then turns around. "Ah, a word of caution. Please do not explore the school grounds until the dean has met with you and do not open any of the drawers in this flat."

"Why?" Dio immediately counters.

The prebendary only smiles. "Consider it an initiation of sorts." Then he steps outside, closing the door behind him and leaving the two boys to their own devices.

"Dio," Jonathan starts at a whisper, "You really shouldn't -- "

"Be quiet," Dio hisses, holding up a hand. Although Jonathan looks affronted, he obediently keeps quiet. As soon as the prebendary disappears from the window's vantage point, Dio stands up, trying the door. It's locked, of course, and he gives an irritated sigh.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan asks.

Dio rolls his eyes, releasing the doorknob. "Try for yourself."

Jonathan does.

"So it's locked," he remarks, and then promptly goes back to his seat.

"That's all?" Dio demands. "You have no qualms about being locked in a strange cottage by a man we've never met? He could be a swindler, a fake, a thief stealing our valuables at this moment, do you have any idea how easy it is to get ahold of the vicar's garb?"

"But he knew our names," Jonathan reasons.

"Yeah, he could have found out by reading the real prebendary's letters."

"Why would he go through all the trouble to steal our luggage? There's nothing of value there."

"Jojo," Dio grates, "The clothes you're wearing could probably feed a family of four for a month."

"Don't be silly," his idiot cousin laughs, "People can't eat cloth!"

Thankfully, Jonathan catches the flash of ire in Dio's eyes and, while he can't pinpoint the reason, he correctly concludes that their current predicament was partially at fault. So he raises his hands, giving a placating smile. "You're right, of course," he begins, "It does seem odd that the dean would send a prebendary to meet us, and then have us wait, separated from our luggage. But suppose he was speaking the truth and that this is some sort of initiation? Father has said that this school has traditions stemming back to medieval times; would it be difficult to believe this is one of them?"

Dio exhales, relaxing his shoulders and going to sit back down.

"You are right," he admits, "I spoke in haste."

'I thought of London,' he will not say, 'and of the tricks there that would make fools of men.'

Jonathan only grins wider, taking a biscuit and offering it to the other boy. Dio snorts, but he opens his mouth regardless, crunching through the buttery shortbread. Jonathan takes a piece for himself, sipping at the tea. He licks his fingers afterwards and Dio wipes his mouth.

"You're nervous too, aren't you?" Jonathan asks, tilting his head.
"Don't be ridiculous," Dio snaps.

"I'm sorry," his cousin adds. "I know Father wouldn't have sent us out here if it weren't for me. If you dislike it that much, you can go home you know? Father wasn't lying when he said that. He's a man of his word, you can believe him."

'As if,' Dio wants very much to say. 'As if I would pick one countryside over the other, especially as your father thinks he is grooming me to be your lifelong servant and I am grooming you for your own murder.'

"I would not," he says aloud. "For it is as you said: we are cousins."

Jonathan's expression softens and he quirks his lips lopsidedly. "Thank you," he replies, lightly patting Dio's hand. "I'm grateful that you're here of course, but I don't want you to be miserable on my behalf."

"Speak for yourself," Dio snorts.

And so it is that conversation resumes. Between the two of them, they talk on things they'll miss, thing's they're looking forward to, books they still need to read, and rumors they've heard about boarding schools. All in all, it's the same sort of talk Jonathan had initiated throughout the carriage ride. Throughout the dialogue, Dio's gaze flickers across the abode. He starts off glancing at the window, then the empty bookshelves and the chest of drawers. Outside of the candles and snacks on the table, there was no other evidence that the room was inhabited. There was neither icebox nor washroom, not even a clock.

Jonathan continues chattering, seemingly oblivious to Dio's absentmindedness. Dio, for his part, regularly checks his pocketwatch. The carriage had pulled up to the cathedral entrance at a quarter past twelve. It was now thirteen minutes to one.

When the church bells toll, Jonathan stops halfway. Dio is looking at him, half-expecting, half-accusing.

"Maybe the meeting is taking longer than expected?" the younger boy tries. The excuse sounds flimsy, even to his ears.

At this point, both tea and biscuits are finished. Jonathan has, much to his older cousin's consternation, even licked up the crumbs.

"This is ridiculous," Dio repeats, getting up and trying the door again. In the hour's time, it has not unlocked itself. With a grunt, he throws himself against it, but of course it does not budge.

"Dio!" Jonathan exclaims, "What are you doing?! Didn't you listen to Father Harcourt -- even if the door was unlocked, we're not allowed to wander around!"

"Who would want to wander around this place?" the older boy retorts, giving one last kick before stomping back to his seat. Jonathan yammers on about rules and traditions and similar stories he had heard from the handful of boys he saw at the annual boys who actually attended boarding school. Dio tunes him out, keeping track of the time. Two hours, he concludes. He'll give the dean and prebendary until two in the afternoon. After that, he would use his knife to force the door open.

His plans are rendered useless when Jonathan abruptly stops talking, snapping his jaws together stops talking, snapping his jaws together and staring hard at his empty plate.

Dio frowns.
"Now what it is?"

"Nothing," Jonathan squeaks.

"It's obviously something," the other boy says. Assuming the worst, he whirls around, looking at the single window. But as there's nothing outside, he turns back to his cousin. "What is it?" he asks again. His tone is quieter this time.

"It's nothing," Jonathan insists.

As he refuses to elaborate, Dio goes back to staring at the pocketwatch. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the timepiece goes.

At twelve minutes past the hour, Jonathan clears his throat. His face is bright red at this point and his legs are pointedly crossed.

"Dio," Jonathan whispers, unable to look him in the eye.

Dio puts two and two together and grimaces.

"Oh no," he groans. "But you went at the inn!"

"That was five hours ago!" Jonathan counters. Then he groans too, burying his face in his hands, "You must not tell them. I'm so embarrassed! This is so embarrassing!"

"You're almost fifteen years old," Dio gripes, "Couldn't you show some self-restraint? You must have drank three-quarters of the tea!"

"Please don't yell," Jonathan begs, plugging his ears and squeezing his eyes shut.

Dio feels the onset of a headache. He pockets his watch then, getting up and flicking open his knife with a flourish. He sets to work, jabbing this way and that at the handle, and when Jonathan finally looks his way, he's halfway through the main bolt.

"Dio!" the younger boy exclaims, scrambling to his feet, "What are you doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Dio asks, fiddling further. "I was going to wait another hour, but as you've proved yourself an incontinent child..."

"It's not like that...!" Jonathan practically-wails. He makes a go at pulling the knife out of his cousin's hands. Dio bats the attempt aside, raising an eyebrow.

"I could wait another hour..." he starts.

"Yes. Yes -- please."

"But I doubt you'll be able to hold it in."

"I will!" Jonathan insists. His posture tells a different story.

Dio frowns a second time.

"I find it difficult to believe that you would choose dirtying your own trousers to disobeying the prebendary's instructions." He pauses, trying to make sense of the situation, and narrows his eyes at the obvious conclusion. "Unless -- do you know something I don't? Is that why you're so desperate to obey?"
Jonathan blinks. "Uh," he intelligently begins, "What?"

Dio rolls his eyes for the umpteenth time, muttering 'to hell with it' under his breath. It takes less than a minute for him to turn the final latch, and then the door is open.

"Dio!" Jonathan hisses, except then he's being dragged through the school buildings, across the central lawn, and into the cloisters. There, to the left, sure enough, is the sign for a washroom. He throws his useless younger cousin into, ignoring his complaints, and soundly shuts the door.

"God," he curses quietly, "What an idiot."

Jonathan finishes his business soon enough, stumbling out of the washroom in a noticeably relaxed state. His cheeks are still pink, but he grins sheepishly.

"Thanks again," he mutters, and lets himself be dragged back to the abode. The two of them get no further than the dividing gate before they are greeted by the prebendary flanking the man who was most certainly the dean.

Both of them freeze then, though Dio's tightens his grip significantly.

"Good day to you," the dean greets, nodding his head.

"Good day to you too, sir!" Jonathan readily replies. Dio gives a reluctant echo.

"My, you must Mr. Joestar. And you are Mr. Brando, correct?" The two boys nod. "Good. I am Richard Owen, the dean. Mr. Joestar, there is no need to look scared; Mr. Brando, I would advise you to maintain your expression. But neither of you are in any trouble."

"Even though we didn't listen?" Jonathan asks.

"Ah, it was, as Father Harcourt has said, a sort of initiation. A test of character, if you will."

"And we didn't fail?"

"Fail? Goodness, no!" the dean laughs, clapping both of their shoulders, "Dear me, Father Harcourt, what are you telling these poor boys?"

"You were the one who instructed me to make them take the test seriously," the prebendary asserts.

"True, true," the dean sighs.

"Wait," Dio interjects, brows furrowing. "So the hour and a half we spent in that cottage was a test?"

"And we passed with flying colors?" Jonathan adds.

"Well," the dean starts, stroking his beard, "It isn't the sort of test where you can pass or fail. As I said before, it is primarily a test of character. Despite growing up under the Viscount's tutelage, it is clear that the two of you are quite different -- a normal enough occurrence, I will give you that." He claps his hands and two other boys walk out from the gates. "Now, as I'm sure you're aware, the school has many traditions. One of the more recent innovations, then, is the splitting of classes."

With his right hand, he motions to Dio.

"Mr. Dio Brando, in demonstrating decisiveness which will prove invaluable in leading divided
factions, I place you in the York Class."

Dio stares, stupefied, as one of the boys fastens a white rose crest to his lapel.

"And Mr. Jonathan Joestar, for your gamely display of fortitude and camaraderie which will aid you greatly on the battlefield, I place you in the Lancaster Class."

Jonathan of course is glowing with happiness, grinning from cheek-to-cheek as a matching red rose crest is fastened.

"One of the traditions the school has continued with is a mentorship between pupils. Now, as both of you are starting in the middle of the third year, I decided it would be better for peers to introduce to the classes and buildings, rather than upperclassmen. By Father Harcourt's recommendation -- as these two boys are cousins as well -- we have Mr. Donagan from York as a mentor to Mr. Brando and Mr. Cross from Lancaster as a mentor to Mr. Joestar."

"Hello," the boy known as Cross introduces himself, stepping back and extending his hand. "It looks like I'll be showing you the ropes."

"I'll be in your care," Jonathan earnestly answers, shaking vigorously.

Dio exchanges a noticeably colder greeting with his mentor.

"Very good!" the dean concludes, clapping his hands. "Misters Donagan and Cross are extremely promising pupils in their own right, but if you have any further questions, do not hesitate to ask Father Harcourt or myself -- or any of the other teachers, for that matter. Now, I must write to the Viscount confirming your arrival and attendance, but I look forward to seeing you in the supper hall." He sweeps away with the prebendaryst in-tow, leaving the four boys at the junction between church and school.

"Cross," Donagan addresses. There's a familiar sharpness in his tone, one which Dio knows well.

"Yes?"

"Let's part here. The shared stuff can be covered by the teachers."

"Hmmm, good idea," Cross replies, in that quick-to-agree manner. "Come along Joestar," he urges, grabbing Jonathan by the wrist and pulling him to the left.

"Ah, okay! See you later Dio!" Jonathan calls, trailing along.

"You too, Brando," Donagan adds, jabbing a thumb in the opposite direction. "First week is on me, but after that, you're on your own."

"I don't need your help," Dio spits, too angry and too overwhelmed to bother with fronts.

The other boy only laughs, giving him a rough push.

"Yeah, and I don't want to give it. But rules are rules and tradition is tradition. Now come on. We need to finish the tour of the grounds before supper."
Once the two of them are a sufficient distance from the gated entrance, Cross lets go of Jonathan's wrist, turning to look the other boy up and down. Like most of the other southerners, the Joestar heir is built well and dressed finer. He has lovely blue eyes too, a rarity on such dark hair.

Jonathan observes in-turn. For someone a whole head taller than him, with slick brown locks and bright green eyes, there's a strange shyness to his posture. But then Cross smiles, and it's the smile of an apex predator: indolent and indulgent, and Jonathan needs to steel himself against taking a step back. And then the other boy tugs on a strand of his hair and Jonathan does step back.

"Wh-what was that -- " he stammers, feeling his cheeks heat up.

"You're not German, are you?" Cross asks out of the blue.

"What? No! Well, not that I know of at least." Admittedly, he doesn't know his lineage further than four generations, but those four generations were certainly English!

"I see." Cross taps his cheek, contemplating. "Well, I have to admit it's my first time leading someone around so, unlike Clare, I don't know what I'm doing."

"That's okay," Jonathan is quick reassure, "I wouldn't know any better!"

"Fair enough." He turns around, leading his new classmate into the west end. "Alright, I'll give you a tour of the redgrounds. See those flowers over there?" he points to a bunch of red blossoms, surprisingly alive despite the snow, "Those are poinsettas. We have zinnias, begonias, carnations, and roses throughout the year. If you have a green thumb you might want to..." he pauses, "Ah, nevermind then. Continuing on...

"Should I have memorized those names?" Jonathan asks, "Um, I remember poinsettas and... roses..."

"No, it's not necessary. None of this is necessary, to be honest." He pauses again, "Would you prefer to go straight to the rooms? I'm sure you'll find your way soon enough."

"No, no! I'm sorry for being inattentive -- I'll pay better attention!"

"Uh, right. This isn't a lecture, you know?" Cross continues, unlatching the curlequed gate and ushering the other boy in, "So these flowers mark the start of the redgrounds. Ah, that's the name for the Lancaster domain. Yorks get the whitegrounds with white flowers. You're welcome to visit your cousin, but you'll need to meet in the pink -- don't worry, there's a lot of it. Apparently, it used to be that the two classes could come and go wherever, but the old dean put a stop to it."

"Don't go into the whitegrounds, meeting with Dio in the middle," Jonathan recites, nodding. "Got it."

"And here's the lounge. There's food and drink here. The first two meals are served in the adjoining cafeteria; supper is eaten with the others. There are three nurses and one doctor in both of the grounds, unless you're really sick, you'll need an appointment. There's a library of naval reports and literature over there, but the main library is still the best for books." He leads Jonathan through the estate, from the games room to the baths to the kitchen (officially off-limits) to the study. And then they're going up three flights of stairs to the second floor. The underclassmen live in sets of three-to-four, the upperclassmen are split into pairs, and the Class Head and Shoulder get their own
rooms, as does the Caretaker. The servants live on the third floor and they are not to be disturbed under any circumstance.

"It's likely that your stuff... ah, yes," Cross interrupts himself, swinging open the door to reveal a well-furnished room with four of everything: tables, chairs, beds, wardrobes, and bookshelves. Jonathan's suitcase has been placed on top of the empty table. "This is your luggage, right?"

Jonathan nods.

"Good. Well, this is your room. Don't get too attached to it, you won't be here for long."

"Why?"

"Because you transferred in the third year, which means that you only get one year of being an underclassman." Cross makes a face, adding, "I'm quite envious, I must admit. Sharing with other people isn't pleasant."

"So you're aiming to be Class Head then?"

"Naturally."

Cross glances at his timepiece and, after discovering it to be earlier than expected, puts it back, continuing with: "I could show you the fields and courts or you could unpack?"

"Where are you staying?" Jonathan blurts out.

"To your right," he motions to an identical neatly-made bed. "That bed over there belongs to Merridew, the last one is Grace's. You'll meet them soon enough, they're both choirboys. Are you tired? If you are, you're welcome to sleep. There are bells for literally everything -- breakfast, lunch, supper, not to mention all the classes, so there's no chance you'll oversleep. I think you're allotted one week to adjust, but you'll have to check with the Caretaker on that. Oh, don't bother with the luggage, the maids will unpack it for you."

"Ahh," Jonathan muses, covering his mouth, "Am I keeping you?"

"Oh no, not at all. I've made plans to go riding at 4 o'clock but there's still an hour before that."

"Riding?" Jonathan echoes.

"Yes, it's great fun. D'you know how?"

"Of course!"

"Capital!" Cross exclaims, clapping his hands. "Well, you're welcome to come with -- there's not nearly enough underclassmen who enjoy a good race!"

"I didn't know there were horses here," Jonathan admits, "Did you bring your own?"

"Some of us, yes. But I'm sure there's a horse you can borrow. Say, why don't we go there now and check? Stables are in the pink of course."

"Oh, could we?" Jonathan beams, "I admit I'm not much for racing, but after a week in that carriage, I'd love to go for a ride!"

"Of course!" Cross laughs, patting him on the back, "Let's get changed into something more appropriate, did you bring your riding boots? Yes? Great."

He promptly goes to his wardrobe, rummaging around. Jonathan does the same with his suitcase and within minutes, they've changed their garments. "I'm so glad equestrianism is offered at Chichester," Cross adds while he's leading
the way to the stables, "You wouldn't believe how many of the other boys couldn't canter, much less trot, to save their lives! And don't get me started on hunting... the idea of shooting at things on foot!" He shudders, turning again, "Ah, what's the matter? Do you not hunt much?"

"I -- " Jonathan starts. "I had a dog. But he -- "

"Oh dogs are the best. If I could get a penny for every time we wished for one when we were stuck on that wretched island..." he reaches over the gate, unlatching the stall door, "What was his name? Was he a good dog?"

"Danny," the other boy slowly replies. "His name was Danny." Then he shakes his head, chuckling softly. "He was a terrible hunter, always chasing everything up trees, but he was the best of friends." He reaches up to scratch the ears of one of the horses. It nickers softly, nibbling his fingers.

"I'm sure he was," Cross agrees. He fastens his laces a second time before grabbing a pair of bits and reins. "How d'you like that one? I don't think anyone's asked for her." He double-checks the table of horses. "Yup, she seems to be free for the afternoon."

"Yes please!" Jonathan trills.

Cross whistles appreciatively when the other boy expertly tacks the horse up. He pulls the gate back, leading the horse out, and swings himself onto its back with ease. Cross saddles his own horse then, leading it out of the stables and mounting it with a running jump. Jonathan cheers, clapping, and Cross grins. And then, with no words and a click of heels, they are bounding over the snowscape.

For Jonathan, it is the most fun he's had in months. He promises that, as soon as he's back in the dorms, he'll write a letter to his father, thanking him for recommending the school. More than the change of scenery and pace, the prospect of new friends and shared hobbies is a breath of fresh air.

For Cross, it is meeting a like-minded individual: someone who appreciates horses and horseback riding outside of sports. Sure, it was a primarily continental fashion and yes, most of the men who practiced the art of dressage were flounces, but it detracted nothing from the fun of it. Although he has had his misgivings about leading the new boy about, they're tossed to the side, like the wind against his face.

Their horses cross the distance between the stables and the forest within half an hour.

"Should we continue?" Jonathan hollers.

"Why not?" Cross shouts back. With a whoop, he spurs his horse forward, pulling at the reins to break it into a jump. The other boy wastes no time gasping, kicking his heels and making the lost distance up. Cross laughs, immensely pleased, and so they go crashing through the forest.

After an hour, he remembers his earlier appointment and curses.

"Oh shoot!"

"What is it?"

"The meeting with Webb and Wilcox, I was supposed to -- oh, damn it!" He stops his horse, making it go about-face. Jonathan does the same. "It's not a big deal, but they're going to be quite cross, no doubt."
"Race you back?" Jonathan grins. And then, without waiting for a reply, he sets off.

"Hey...!"

Despite getting a head start, Cross still wins, but of course, that was the difference between the Thorough and Standard breeds. Jonathan is a good sport about it, catching the proffered towel with a grin and prioritizing the horse over himself.

"Well, well, well," a different boy's voice booms. "My dear Webb, who do we have here?"

"Wilcox, my friend," another boy replies, "If my eyes do not deceive me, it is Cross!"

"And what has he been doing, our dear friend?"

"That's Webb and Wilcox," Cross mutters to Jonathan. He's on the edge of cracking up. "Don't let them get to you, they're a riot act."

"It looks like he's been riding without us!"

"Oh no! Surely not Cross! He would never do that to us, would he?"

"Sorry, sorry!" Cross apologizes, holding up his hands and hanging his head, "I was showing Joestar here around," he motions to Jonathan, "And completely lost track of time! You guys should see him ride though! Varone is a beast under his care!"

"Joestar?" the two boys echo.

"Varone?" Jonathan repeats as well.

"The new boy, remember? The Dean's sorted him into Lancaster, so he's under my care. Ah, and Varone is the horse you were riding."

"Oh ho!" the shorter boy exclaims, "Another whitey, great! Welcome to the Lancaster class. I'm Webb and this here is Wilcox. If you have any questions about faggots and faggotry, please do not hesitate to ask."

Jonathan's jaw drops; Cross falls to the floor snickering.

"Um," he says, trying to be polite, "Excuse me?"

"Faggots," Wilcox repeats, nodding firmly. "You know, blokes like you. You do know what first years are expected to do, right? And that you are under Mr. Cross' jurisdiction? Or perhaps you like to be beaten?"

"Can't forget chopping things off."

"Ah yes, can't forget that!" The two of them do a half-handshake. Wilcox turns to Jonathan, adding, "You're not one of them, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Yup, and neither are we!" Webb concludes. "But seeing as how there are so many of them here," he casts a sly glance in Cross' direction.

"Especially since the headmasters have turned a blind eye to it," Wilcox adds.
"What!" Jonathan exclaims, face reddening at the thought. "But -- but isn't it a sin?!

"Oh Joestar," Cross chuckles, patting his shoulder, "I promise there's a lot worse sinning going on here."

"Disgusting," Webb stage-whispers.

"Positively sickening," Wilcox agrees.

"What is?" Jonathan presses, still unquestionably lost.

"It's a travesty, that's what it is," Webb sighs, patting the new boy's other shoulder. "I'm sorry we let you get a first peek through this faggot's eyes, but from now on, as a fellow Lancaster, we will do our best to re-educate you on proper treatment."

"Fags are meant to be beaten not kissed," Wilcox primly amends.

"Please stop," Cross gasps, genuinely slouched against the stable door in laughter, "Please stop, I've just finished riding and my stomach can't take it!"

"I am so confused!" Jonathan declares, grasping at his head.

"Can we hit him, Cross?" Wilcox asks.

"Can we, can we?"

"What for?" Jonathan demands.

"Insubordination!" Misters Webb and Wilcox chorus.

"No, no," Cross interjects, snapping his fingers. "Joestar is the son of a viscount, so hands off. Oh, but if you want to be helpful, explain to him some of the other rules? I tend to forget them, you can't expect me to follow them, after all." He sits himself down on a haystack and proceeds to absent-mindedly brush a nearby horse.

"An explanation?" Webb asks.

"Can we explain things?" Wilcox replies.

"Hold it right there," both of them command. Jonathan freezes in his sneaking away, smiling weakly.

"I'm... I'm sure it must be suppertime?" he tries.

"Oh no, Mister Joestar, supper isn't for another hour."

"At least."

"So why don't you sit yourself down -- no, not on the haystack, on the floor. A fag must do what a fag must do," he claps his hands and, out of nowhere, Wilcox brings up various pamphlets with hand-drawn charts and diagrams. "See here, this is how things are: at the top is the dean, below him are the church fellows, below them are the teachers, then the class heads and shoulders, the upperclassmen, the lowerclassmen and at the very bottom -- is you." He points to the helpfully-circled lower rung, carefully outlined in red.

"But I'm not -- " Jonathan starts.
"I should've known better than to ask you two for help," Cross grumbles, getting up and pulling the younger boy to his feet. "Don't cry, you're the son of a viscount. Webb! Wilcox! You guys should be ashamed -- bullying your junior!"

"We're only two years older than him."

"And we're in the same class as him!"

"As I am too," Cross adds. "Okay, let me try to boil this down. The school has a system of mentorship where, in exchange for being led around and clued in, you get to help out with menial labor like washing windows, weeding gardens, and polishing glassware. Maybe you'll get to clean the stables if you're unlucky. To be honest, I'm not very interested in it, so you can do as you please," and then, turning to his loudly-gasping classmates, he tosses in: "Before you point fingers, why not raise your marks so the dean would recommend you to be a mentor? Then we'll see what's what!"

"My, Webb," Wilcox whispers, "Cross sure is talking big!"

"I know, I know," Webb answers, "I mean, isn't this his first appointment?"

"I'm okay with chores," Jonathan admits, still slightly teary, "But... well... you won't make me -- " Unable to spit it out, he wrings his hands and stares intently at the dirtied cobblestones.

"No, no!" he's clapped on the back and shoved into a half-hug, "It's true that some of your classmates and many upperclassmen enjoy, well, it, but it isn't something anyone can pressure you into. On that note, if someone outside of these two clowns is making you feel uncomfortable, you know you should tell me, right? Either I'll sort it out, or Clare -- I mean, Donagan -- will, or we'll alert the teachers. Even though we're in the same grade," he shrugs, "I'm probably two years older than you."

"Eh?" Jonathan intones. "Why?"

"That's a story for a later day. Come along now, we should probably scrape the mud off our boots and head back to the residences. Webb, Wilcox, you too. Attendance at tonight's supper is mandatory, Prothmore has said he'll chase you down otherwise."

The first supper at Chichester is a grand affair, everyone has dressed to the nines and the formal dining room is subsequently awash with black and white. Jonathan and Dio are introduced as new students along with four others, while the dean admits that mid-term transfers were a rarity. The other students (especially those in the same class) give a rousing cheer for their arrival, swarming about them and pulling the six new boys apart, four in red and two in white.

Jonathan has been invited, on Cross' invitation, to sit at Donagan's table. Webb and Wilcox are present (in the middle of an eating-peas-with-knives competition), but Dio strangely is not. He looks this way and that for his older cousin and, upon being unable to find him, finally catches Donagan's attention, meekly asking the other boy.

"Brando?" Donagan shrugs, "I don't know. Your cousin was not inclined to go on a tour, it's a wonder he even showed up for supper."

"He might be resting," Cross suggests, making a sympathetic face. "Donagan, could you send someone to check?"
"Oh no, it's fine," Jonathan sighs, "I'm sure he's alright."

"He better be," Donagan mutters, "The dean'll have my neck if another one of the tutees ends up lost."

Sure enough, Dio turns up for the latter half of the festivities, creeping out of the shadows and snatching a glass of wine from his cousin's grasp.

"Hey!" Jonathan whines, "I was going to -- " he stops halfway as Dio downs the glass in one gulp, setting it to the side and wiping his mouth.

"Jojo," Dio begins, "We need to talk."

Jonathan sobered up immediately, touching the other boy's hand. "Of course," he says, "Shall we go outside?"

That Dio allows himself to be led is worrisome enough, to say nothing of the churning sensation in his stomach.

"Well?" he prompts, once they are sufficiently outside. He's grateful to have brought his overcoat along, the winter night is chilling. Dio, standing before him and dressed in little more than a blazer, manages to keep from shivering.

"I hate this place," his older cousin says. "I hate the traditions and the people and I don't want to stay here."

"What?! But why? You've only been here one day!" Jonathan collects himself, taking the other boy's hands. "Dio," he gently begins, "I know you must be slightly homesick, but -- "

"Homesickness has nothing to do with it," Dio retorts, yanking his hands away and taking a step back. "And there's nothing to explain. I've been here for half a day and concluded in that time that I hate this place. What else do you need to know?"

"But why?" Jonathan presses. "Is it the location? Or the snow? It's a lot more than you get in London, certainly but it'll melt."

"No, Jojo," Dio snaps, "It's not because of the snow. I want to go back, how difficult is it for you to understand?"

"At least tell me why!" And then, when Dio will not say, Jonathan ventures a guess: "Is it related to why you were missing for supper?"

Dio scowls, looking away.

"It is, isn't it? Well, tell me why at least."

"I asked," his older cousin starts, after a length of silence, "To be transferred out of the York class. I was summarily dismissed by the dean and told that future requests would have to be made through the correct channels. Which is to say, not at all." Everything about him is dangerous then, from his posture to his gaze. Jonathan overlooks it all however, honing in on his own surprise.

"Transfer?" he repeats, eyes wide. "But you just got here! How would you know that you don't like a class already?"

"I just know," Dio stubbornly replies.
"You're being ridiculous," Jonathan says.

"No, I'm not. Your father said that we could ask to come back at the drop of a hat and that is what I intend to do."

"You just arrived here!"

"And I already know I dislike it."

"You might change your mind!"

"Unlikely." Dio tosses his head and crosses his arms.

As Jonathan is in no mood for a fight, he gives up prematurely.

"Alright," he says, "If you are so determined, I cannot stop you. I will miss you, of course, but I'm sure -- "

"Don't be foolish Jojo," Dio interrupts, "Did you think I came here to tell you goodbye?"

"Well I wouldn't -- "

"No. You are to write to your father."

"Me!" Jojo exclaims, "Why me?"

"Because you need to tell him that you are miserable here as well. Then we will both go back to the manor."

"What! Dio, you're being ridiculous -- why would I leave here? I like it here!"

"And I hate it!"

"So leave then!"

"Do you really think your father would send a carriage for me?"

"Of course!" Jonathan laughs. "Dio, you should know that Father -- "

"Dreams that I will be your permanently indentured servant?" Dio finishes.

"You don't mean that," Jonathan whispers.

"Oh, but I do."

"That's just the alcohol talking. We should get back to the dining hall, the others -- "

"Could not care less?" Dio spits. "I don't know what you see in these people Jojo, they're bores and stooges, the whole lot of them. But then, I'm sure your father must have told you how important it would be to earn their good favor."

Jonathan barrels into Dio then, breaths short and pupils blown.

"Take that back!" he demands, "Your insults to my father and friends -- you take them back!"

"What friends?" Dio scoffs, "You've only known them for half a day!"
"Half a day is time enough!" his younger cousin shouts back, "I've known you for two years and still can't stand you at times!"

"You think they'd give a damn about you if you weren't the son of a viscount?"

Thankfully, the fight is cut short by their mentors' intervening. Donagan pulls them apart, shoving Jonathan towards Cross and throwing a blanket over Dio. The teacher-in-charge is made to turn a blind eye to the incident, admitting that the first fortnight was meant for acclimation. With a howl, Dio throws the blanket off, stomping back to the York residences. Jonathan is trembling with rage and needs to be helped back. Despite his mentor's questioning, he refuses to elaborate on the scuffle, heading straight for bed and snoring soon after.

For a fortnight, he resolutely ignores his cousin. Dio does the same.
Jonathan wakes the next morning in an unfamiliar bed with an unfamiliar ache in his head. It is as if there are stones wedged behind his eyelids. In remembering the phrase, he remembers Dio, and in remembering Dio, he remembers the argument from last night. He rubs at his eyes, cringing at the winter morning light, and goes to wash up. The bell for breakfast rings in half an hour and with it, his roommates wake. Cross leads him to class, noting that underclassmen of both classes were put into set courses and that specialization of subjects was an opportunity exclusive for upperclassmen.

Back in the manor, when he and Dio had their squabbles, his older cousin had always been the first to reconcile. He rarely apologized of course, Jonathan can only remember Dio saying sorry once, but there was an appropriately remorseful arch in his gaze and Jonathan had always leapt at the chance. It is different now that they are away from the manor. They do not share breakfast or courses for one, and there are so many other pupils for another. And so, even though Jonathan makes himself as available as possible, wasting away the afternoon in the middle grounds, Dio does not approach him -- does not even greet him at dinner.

He should take the first step this time, he reasons, and tries to get the other boy's attention after dessert. The resulting glare sends him reeling, dashing across the snow and back into the residences and wondering what he did wrong.

The rest of the week is not much better: despite his promise to Danny and Erina, he's still missed two and a half years of standardized schooling. Nothing was entirely new, but the difference in methodology made a wide berth. Suddenly, the ways of transcription and transliteration -- of reading and writing -- which his father had drilled into him for years are outdated.

Adding fuel to the fire is how nothing seems to be going his way. Pencils and papers he swore he packed away vanish from sight. He somehow forgets his issued blazer in the snow and needs to borrow a spare. Though his mentor's presence is enough, Jonathan swears he can hear the other boys snickering. And then there's the matter of his shoelaces being tied -- left foot to right -- and how he caused a scene, screaming and scrabbling down a flight of stairs -- and how, by the fourth day, the dean had recommended he see the doctor, just to double-check everything was alright.

When the Latin assignment he had spent Monday night slaving over disappears from his bag and the teacher makes him recite the conjugations as proof of the assignment's completion, Jonathan finds himself standing at the front of the class completely tongue-tied. Despite Cross' vouching for his having completed the assignment, the teacher still makes him sit in the corner. He's not made to wear the dunce hat but he might as well be -- the dimwitted south-western farmboy whose sleeves went past his fingertips!

To make matters worse is how everyone, but especially the boys from the York class, was intent on comparing him to his cousin. In academics and athletics and etiquette and everything else, he comes up short -- acceptably versed in most things but never good enough. There's whispers, though Cross tries to hide them, of how their last names should be reversed -- how the name Joestar would be dragged through the mud with someone like himself inheriting. It is a couple days and a handful of pitying glances at that, but the implications cut him deep. His own insecurities rise to the surface and he remembers how his father had compared him with Dio and concluded time and again that the other boy was better.

That night, he dreams of his older cousin usurping him and wakes in a proper fit, screaming so loud
that the residence's caretaker came running.

He promises again that he's fine, that it's only a fit of nerves and a figment of imagination. It is a ridiculous fear he knows -- Dio had never been anything but good to him, helping him with manners and dancing and keeping him from seeing his best friend and beloved's mangled corpses. And what had he done in return? Unwittingly dragged him off to a wretched place far from all they had ever known which Dio already said he hated and Jonathan still made him stay.

The guilt eats away at him and come Wednesday afternoon, he's in such poor spirits that not even the prospect of horseback riding is enough. He tries to give some excuse -- the doubled-up Latin assignment would surely suffice -- but Cross, despite only being his mentor for a week, sees right through him. He sends a missive to one of the second years and follows Jonathan back to their shared room. Merridew and Grace are still at choice practice by the looks of it, so Jonathan busies himself with the make-up work.

Instead of pestering further, the other boy launches into a grand narration of how the lot of them (himself, Donagan, Webb, Wilcox, and a dozen other boys) ended up skipping two years of school which was why they were older than the others. Jonathan tries to listen, really, but at a certain point, the monologue sounds like gibberish.

"So then Donagan asked me why I hit his brother so hard and I said what I said to the big guy. The kid was asking for it!" Cross pauses, waiting for the laughter that won't come, and sighs. "Come off it Joestar, you're not going to be happy redoing last night's assignment. D'you think I followed you back just to tell you about our impromptu vacation?"

With a groan, Jonathan tosses his pen to the floor, leaning forward to bury his face in his arms.

"Come on," Cross urges, "Talk to me. What's wrong? You seemed so happy the first day here. Are you still homesick?"

"A little," Jonathan admits, voice muffled, "But it's mostly because of Dio."

"Your cousin?" the other boy asks. "Oh, is he still angry with you? Don't worry about it, Clare and I used to fight like monsters when we were your age -- I couldn't stand how hoity-toity he needed to be. What was the spat about?"

"I can't say."

"Figures." He sighs, reaching over to ruffle the boy's hair. "Well if it's a matter between the two of you, I'm sure you'll sort it out. There's no sense in being miserable like this, especially when there are horses to be ridden."

"But it's all my fault...!" Jonathan confesses, shaking his head from side to side. "I told him that he could leave if he wanted and he -- " he stops himself in time, throwing himself from the desk to the bed.

Cross makes a sympathetic noise, pulling the blankets out and covering Jonathan with them.

"Alright," he says, "I'll tell you right now that, while your cousin might still be angry, he certainly cares a great deal for you."

Jonathan pokes his head out from under the sheets, blinking blearily.

"What do you mean?"
"Well Clare, I mean, Donagan, was telling me how his mentoring was going. Apparently Brando didn't care for a tour, even of the grounds. He just asked about the traditions. Donagan knows them better than me so you'll have to ask if you're interested, but the long and the short of it is he threw a fit when Donagan explained pets."

"Pets?"

"Not like cats and dogs. More like what Webb and Wilcox were going on about."

"But... what does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing much. But Donagan said that the two of you might catch some of the upperclassmen's attentions. It's not a bad thing, you know? I've heard they treat you quite well. We're all gentlemen after all." He laughs, continuing with, "Anyways, so Donagan said that if any upperclassman propositions you, it is within your rights to decline. Unless it's the Class Head or Shoulder, in which case it would be in your best interest to accept."

"It's just chores, right?" Jonathan presses, eyes wide.

"That's an unusual way of looking at it, I'll give you that," Cross quips. "But anyways, I'm sure my cousin must have reassured him that the chances were slim -- only one of the four actually likes boys -- and that it was a great honor to be chosen, but he went absolutely wild. Made me promise to keep you out of their clutches and all that."

"Dio asked for that?" Jonathan sibilates.

"Asked? More like threatened!" Cross snickers, "If I wasn't so used to dealing with Donagan, I might've wet myself. There, you're looking a lot happier," he pinches his tutee's cheek, "Chin up, Joestar. The world isn't as dire as you think. I won't be back until after supper, tell Merridew not to lock the window, alright?" He ruffles the younger boy's hair again before slipping into his overcoat and ambling out the door.

Knowing that Dio didn't hate him after all -- was still looking out for him, even -- floods Jonathan with relief. With this new information, he wants nothing more than to catch up on lost sleep. But it is not the right thing to do. So he roots around his wardrobe, pulling out the writing set his father had given him on his thirteenth name day, and begins to pen a letter. He's still no good with formalities and the letter is hardly proper, but he hopes his father will not mind much. He double-checks his spelling before sealing the envelope, penning the address of the manor before putting it in outbound post.

Although it had taken them a week to reach the school by carriage, the post moves much faster. Sure enough, Jonathan receives a reply the following Tuesday. As he had expected, his father is as accommodating as ever, re-affirming his previous position, noting that he had sent a near-identical letter to Dio, and adding that if Dio wished to leave immediately, he should ask the dean to send a message via telegraph -- apparently the manor had been connected to the main lines at last -- to expedite the carriage. The viscount concludes with his love for Jonathan and his hopes that his son, at least, would enjoy his time at school.

"Hey, what the -- " Grace starts.

"I have to go!" Jonathan calls back, slamming the door. He sprints down the stairs, through the doors, and across the lawn, letter clutched to his chest. The five hundred snow-covered meters that separate the Yorks from the Lancasters, he crosses in a matter of minutes. He excitedly knocks on the door of the Yorkish residence, and is greeted by an upperclassman.
"Hey," the other boy frowns, "You're not supposed to be here!"

"Could you get Dio for me?" Jonathan asks, "It's very important!"

"Dio? We don't have no Dio."

"Ah -- I mean -- " it sounds so strange to call the other boy by his surname, no wonder Cross kept messing up!, 'Brando. Is Mister Brando here? I need to -- "

"Jojo," Dio coolly greets, stepping out from the corridor. Jonathan sees an identical envelope sticking out of his coat pocket and beams.

"Dio! I need to talk to you, can we -- "

"Of course," his cousin replies, slipping through the door. "Leave us," he casually instructs, and though the upperclassman scowls, he closes the door without comment.

As they've been apart for two weeks, Jonathan is happy just to see the other boy again. Dio is dressed much better now, with a proper winter overcoat and thick trousers. He's wearing fur-lined gloves with Jonathan can't recall the other having, but it's a warm ensemble nonetheless.

"Dio!" he jubilantly repeats.

"Jojo."

"Did you get the letter Father sent? I got one too!"

"Of course." The two of them trade letters then, quickly scanning over the contents. As expected, Dio's letter is almost identical, save for Mr. Joestar's apology for encouraging him to go along and an additional note that the Viscount had found another school for him and hoped that the second one would be more amenable.

Jonathan, in a mistaken display faith towards his own self-control, looks up, forcing his lips into a wide smile.

"Isn't this grand?" he asks, "I told you Father would prioritize your happiness!"

In response, Dio pulls his gloves off, pocketing them, before brushing his fingers against Jonathan's cheek.

Jonathan blinks rapidly. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"You're crying."

"No," he insists, "No, why would I be crying? This is a good thing! It's just... I just..." he tries to rub at his eyes, but Dio pushes his hands away, cupping Jonathan's face with one hand and wiping the boy's tears with the other. "Dio," Jonathan insists, "You heard Father -- there's a much better school waiting for you, tell the dean before supper and he can send a telegraph through. The carriage... you might be able to leave tomorrow!"

Through his blurred vision, Jonathan swears he catches his cousin smirk.

"Will you miss me that much?" Dio asks, "Is that why you're crying?"

"No!" Jonathan heatedly asserts, even as he's breaking out of Dio's hold and throwing himself against the other boy. "No," he repeats, wrapping his arms about Dio's neck and shaking his head,
"Something's just in my eye -- I'm not crying."

If Dio is surprised by the outburst, he does not show it. Rather, he chuckles mildly, leaning his chin against Jonathan's head.

The embrace ends soon enough; Jonathan lets go and steps back, cheeks red over his outburst. "Promise me you'll write?" he mumbles, unable to look the other in the eye.

Instead of responding, Dio folds Jonathan's letter up, slipping it into his cousin's pocket. Then he takes Jonathan's hands, running his thumb over the wrists. "You should be wearing gloves," he notes. He pulls out the aforementioned pair then, slipping them onto Jonathan's hands and pulling Jonathan's fingers through. It's a perfect fit of course; they've always been the same size.

"Wait a -- " Jonathan starts, wiggling his fingers, "This isn't rabbit!"


"Mm." Jonathan stretches his arms out, patting his cheeks, and then makes to take the gloves off. Dio stills his hands, tutting.

"I'll lend them to you," he says, "It's a long walk back."

"No, I couldn't! Besides," Jonathan grins, making a show of good humor, "You'll be needing these if you go up north!"

And there it is again, that inexplicable quirking of lips.

"I have decided," Dio divulges after a while, "That my initial judgements might have been made in haste. Now that I've stayed for a fortnight, I will admit it's not so bad, this school of yours."

Jonathan stills, unwilling to believe his ears. "What?" his older cousin prompts, mocking, "No reaction? And here I thought you would -- "

He's tackled to the ground in a hug, with Jonathan babbling a number of enthusiasms. "Oh Dio," he sighs, gloved hands pressed against the other boy's shoulders, "I'm so happy! I really like it here -- oh, you have to meet my classmates and I should meet some of yours! Even though I've been misplacing everything, everyone has been so kind and there are horses and Cross has invited me to play polo over the weekend and, and, and...!"

Dio sighs facetiously, letting himself be pulled up, before quieting his cousin with a glance.

"Before any of that," he sniffs, "I want to see your room."

"What? But... but that's against the rules!"

"Only if we get caught."

Although Jonathan puts up a good fight, arguing about the technicalities and repercussions, in the end, he's just too happy that the other is staying. So he lets himself be talked into skipping the first class on Wednesday, easily faking sick with the help of his mentor. It is strangely reminiscent of sneaking cutlery out the kitchen -- the act of sneaking Dio into the Lancaster residence. Although
Jonathan wants to show him the other facilities, Dio cuts straight to chase, demanding to be led to the bedrooms.

Once there, his older cousin heaves a sigh, kneading at his temples.

"Jojo," he scowls, "Your side of the room is an absolute mess."

"What! But I just cleaned it!"

"I see you haven't stopped sneaking snacks into bed," Dio notes, wrinkling his nose. "And the dirty laundry needs to go in the basket, not on the floor. Don't wear your shoes into bed -- you haven't even unpacked?!" he throws open Jonathan's wardrobe and sets about rearranging it, moving from that to the desk, and then back to the bed. "And the window!" he adds, jabbing a finger at the offending object, "Why aren't the edges stuffed?"

"What?"

"Put your hand here, no, not there," he grabs it, shoving it at the bottom of the pane, "Do you feel that?"

"There's wind...?"

"Yes. And you should put a blanket there, rolled-up of course, to keep the cold out. As for snacks, you should set them near the window if you insist on eating." His brow creases further at Jonathan's reaction. "Stop that. Why are you laughing? The maid in charge of cleaning this room should be shot."

"You don't mean that."

"You don't know that," his cousin retorts.

"I missed you too," Jonathan says, smiling.

Maybe Dio would have replied in same. Most likely he would have snorted and gone back to cleaning.

Unfortunately, the residence caretaker, who had been alerted by a maid, walks through the door then, arms crossed and expression set. Despite Jonathan's profuse apologies of 'I'm sorry' and 'it'll never happen again' and likely because of Dio's unreserved nonchalance, the caretaker alerts the dean, who suspends them both from afternoon activities for a fortnight, relegating them to window-wiping. The reasoning was that rules were rules and clearly the two of them had settled in just fine, well enough to be ditching class at least.
In his first year at Chichester, Jonathan is witness to two incidents of fire, neither of which were accidental.

The first fire takes place two months before his fifteenth birthday.

For his birthday, his father had gotten permission for a visit and had taken him and Dio on a boating trip off the southern docks. The most popular opera composer on the continent had fallen ill a month ago and the boys had taken to scanning the newspapers for updates of his health. Jonathan knows all about the man -- even in Britain, his musicals are sold out affairs. His friends, of course, are even more ardent in their admirations. The past two Sundays were spent in hymn and prayer -- even the standoffish Merridew and Grace joined their prayer group!

The press quotes the composer's doctors and the doctors say he is doing better and better each day. Jonathan remembers; he had kept the clippings. At the end of January, it was reported he could stomach soup. In early February, one doctor said he could speak again; a second one said he could move his fingers. By the tenth, the papers say he has gotten up from his bed and will likely walk without aid soon. In part due to this ambitious progression but in large effect of their own hope, the report of his death in the evening of the thirteenth (though it had reached British shores a day later) does more than upset the boys. A great deal of the boys of both classes, upper and under, take to mourning.

It is in this event that Jonathan realizes how isolated, how trapped they are. In this school surrounded by forests and grasslands, the boys are frantic to get out, to get to Venice, to kneel at the musician's soulless corpse and kiss his cold hand. Though he does not ask his father for permission, his friends do. Donagan, Cross, and Webb are summarily rejected via telegraph. Wilcox, whose parents could deny him nothing, is permitted a week off. The dean refuses to grant him a leave of absence however, noting how ridiculous it was for the boys to be mourning at all.

Wilcox, Jonathan later learns, had lunged at the dean, screaming every profanity known to man and accusing him of being, amongst other things, a worshipper of Satan and a sympathizer of 'God's Only Mistake'. He is given ten lashes, detention for three months, and made to write lines after class for a week. The other boys, both York and Lancaster, band around him then, sneaking him sweets and sugars for the whole three months and turning their nose up at the dean.

In a rare, but then, not unexpected, display of clout, the old dean is subsequently removed and replaced by one with strictly Tory leanings. There are whispers that the families of both Heads -- and possibly the Shoulders too -- were involved in the replacing. Either way, the change of supervisor means a change in administration, so much so that only the oldest teachers remain.

But that is later, and this is now.

"Joestar," Cross hisses in the dead of the night. "Joestar, wake up."

Jonathan gives a weak groan, burying his head under the pillow.

"No, don't go back to sleep. Wake up." He yanks the pillow from the other boy's grasp, throwing it to the floor. Then he pulls his tutee's ear.

"Ow -- " Jonathan yelps, before his mouth is smothered by his mentor's hand.

"Quiet," Cross whispers, removing his hand. "Geez, you're hard to wake, you know?"
"Sorry," Jonathan whispers in-turn, slipping out of bed. He sees that the other boys have already left and starts dressing himself as well.

"The distraction is already over," Cross reports, throwing open the window, "We'll have to climb out if we don't want to get caught."

"Sorry for making you wait," Jonathan apologizes. He pulls on his fur-lined gloves and squeezes out the window. With a muffled gasp, he leaps from the sill to the tree branch, willing himself to keep from screaming.

"Clap your hands once you reach the bottom," Cross instructs.

Jonathan claps and then a bottle of oil falls from the window, followed by a box of candles. They had filched both items from the cathedral stores during the day.

"Watch your head," the older boy adds, nimbly hopping from window to branch as well. He slips down the trunk wiping his hands on his trousers, before taking the candle set.

"C'mon," he says, "The others are already there."

Sure enough, the other members of their Wagner Prayer Group -- Donagan, Webb, Wilcox, Merridew, and Grace, namely -- were already assembled around the dean's garden.

"Cross! Joestar!" Wilcox greets, taking the jug out of Jonathan's hands. "Glad you guys could make it."


"Donagan, d'you wanna do the honors?"

"No," the tallest of them replies, shaking his head. "The limelight is for Wilcox tonight."

So, despite Webb stewing facetiously in the background, Wilcox solemnly pours the oil over the dean's beloved chrysanthemums. Grace takes out his lighter, a miniature model of Döbereiner's lamp. Right as he's about to light the first candle, Jonathan intervenes.

"Wait," he says, stooping down and piling up a bunch of pebbles and stones.

"Joestar," Webb growls, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Even houses made of stone and brick can catch fire."

"What do you think we're aiming for?" Donagan laughs.

"We are not killing the dean!" Jonathan hisses.

"Joestar, back down," Cross advises.

"No," the younger boy replies, still meticulously building up, "I said I would help with the candles and oil, but I won't agree to watching him burn."

"Agree, disagree, who even gives a shit?" Wilcox snorts.

"So you disagree," Merridew shrugs, "Turn around and go back. Or better yet, Cross, lead him home."
"My cousin," Donagan snarls, "Is no one's keeper."

It's meant to be an insult, Jonathan can tell this much by the tone of his voice. And it would be easier, he thinks, looking from the other boy's moonlit faces -- varying degrees of irritation and vexation at his sudden turn of heel -- to walk back, or better yet, keep quiet. But it is not the right thing, so he stands his ground. Or rather, continues to build it.

"Stop that," Webb demands, kicking at the left clod. Jonathan narrowly extracts his hand.

"Webb! Don't you dare -- "

"You've been looking down on us, haven't you?" Webb accuses. "Are you one of the dean's spies? Will you give Wilcox another lashing?"

"Webb," Donagan addresses, "That's enough."

"No! No it's not enough, it won't be be enough until that son of a cunt burns! How dare he run this school -- fucking goddamn Liberals!" Webb kicks at the left clod, then the wall, and needs to be hauled away from Jonathan.

"Joestar," Cross whispers, pulling his tutee up, "Joestar, are you alright?"

"Perfectly fine," Jonathan answers. He even grins, that's how nostalgic the moment feels. "Never been better. Webb, I can understand where you're coming from -- I've felt grief before. You can kick and punch me all you like, I'll block you move for move."

"Those are sharp words," Webb spits, "Coming from a 'plegic who fell off his horse."

Jonathan grits his teeth, intent on maintaining the impasse.

One by one, the other boys look to Donagan. Donagan throws up his hands.

"Fine," he says, getting to his feet and helping with the fortification, "The flowers will be enough for tonight. Webb, it's impolite to make other men murderers."

And just like that, the situation is diffused.

"You mean we're not going to burn him?" Grace asks, sounding genuinely disappointed.

"Not tonight we're not," Merridew replies, kneeling down and helping pile dirt.

Eventually, they make a square wall around the dean's oil-drenched chrysanthemums and Jonathan gives Grace back his lighter. Someone starts singing and the rest of them follow suit. They stay like that, watching the flowers burn, until the embers have died off. There's a huge difference in vision -- the nearly-full moon which had seemed so bright before is now suddenly insufficient. The shadows of the trees look like they could be housing ghosts and demons and the walk back to the Lancaster residence is made in silence.

Not for the first time, Jonathan muses on how odd it was that all of Donagan's friends seemed to be in the other house. How lonely it must be for the other boy, he thinks, being by himself in York! Still, Cross undoubtedly enjoyed the company of his cousin, something Jonathan was envious of. His attempts to include Dio in everything from polo to cricket had been politely but firmly rebuffed. His cousin had made friends with other people in his class -- if rumors were to be believed, he had already become the top pupil in York.

Despite his busy schedule, Dio has enough time to talk to Donagan. He must, Jonathan reasons, for
Donagan is the only Yorker privy to the burning of the dean's flower garden. Dio accosts him at church the next day, nails digging into Jonathan's wrist and asking in a low and dangerous voice what the hell the other boy thought he was doing.

Like usual, Dio gives Jonathan no opportunity for explanation.

The following Monday, Webb apologizes without prompting, admitting that he had acted in a most unbecoming fashion. Jonathan is quick to forgive and even quicker to accept an invitation to play a new game devised by the vulgar pair.

He is extremely surprised then, to see the face of his older cousin amongst the other regulars at their middleground meeting table.

"Dio?" Jonathan exclaims, "What are you doing here?"

"I had some free time."

"More like he heard it was a team game and made some free time," Donagan snorts.

"No," Dio insists, shooting a frosty glare, "I merely had some free time." He takes his glass and gets up to sit next to Jonathan. He resolutely keeps his gaze on the door though.

Jonathan's attempts at catching up are interrupted with the arrival of their hosts, Webb and Wilcox.

"Good evening gentlemen!" Webb grins, doffing his hat, "And welcome to the introductory rendition of Webb and Wilcox's Woe-be-gone Letters!"

"The name just rolls off the tongue!" Wilcox adds.

"Now, I know you're just dying to begin, no, don't start drinking yet!, but we'd like to split you into teams." He lowers his eyes, fluttering his lashes, and turns to his partner-in-crime. "Wilcox, have you any suggestions?"

"Oh, well..." the other boy hums, looking this way and that, "Seeing as how we have four people..."

"And they are two groups of cousins..."

"And how our athletic activities are always split between houses..."

"Right!" they shake hands, grinning widely, "So I was thinking Brando with Cross and Donagan with Joestar?"

"How about no," Donagan responds. Dio says nothing, though he sets his jaw.

"Uh... right," Webb answers, licking his lips. "Okay, how about Donagan with Cross and Brando with Joestar?"

"Bo-ring!" Wilcox calls.

"Much better," Donagan confirms. He crosses and uncrosses his arms. Dio relaxes a little, allowing himself to lean slightly into the couch.

Jonathan and Cross trade tentative smiles.

"So..." Cross starts, clearing his throat, "The rules?"
"One second!" Wilcox rushes out, putting a checkered board on the table.

"Alright, this is your game board and these are your cards. You are allowed to keep seven cards in your hand at once, drawing more as is necessary. The winner is who uses up the most cards."

"And the rules?"

"Didn't you listen to the title? You're using letters to make words, obviously."

"Couldn't we just play charades?" Donagan asks.

"Or bridge?" Dio adds.

"No!" Webb insists, "We've been working for the past week on this game. If you consider it fun, we'd like to dedicate it to Wagner."

"Oh, well," Cross smiles, picking out seven cards, "If it's for the dear musician -- may he rest in peace."

"That's the spirit!" Wilcox grins.

"Five... six... seven..." Jonathan counts, obediently taking the cards as well. The two pairs stare over their given hands as Webb rifles through the deck, extracting the card for the letter 'A' and placing it at the center of the checkerboard.

"Alright," he announces, "Donagan, do you want to go first?"

"Let them have first hand," Donagan shrugs.

"Okay," Webb shrugs too, motioning to the newcomers, "Go ahead."

"Uhh..." Jonathan starts, staring at the given letters.

"Let's start with something small," Dio suggests, taking two letters and placing them to the side of the 'A'. "See how it works."

"Good idea."

"Gag," Wilcox reads.

"Okay, the Joestar-Brando team starts off with gag! What will team Donagan-Cross respond with?"

The other pair puts forth a 'G' and 'O', forming 'ago' from the bottom. Jonathan branches off into 'trot'; Cross retaliates with 'raft'.

"Game set and match!" Webb declares.

"What?!"

"Already?!"

"Yes, because -- as you see -- " he points to the join between 'raft' and 'ago', "Team Donagan-Cross have already spelled out the losing combination!"

"What!" Cross whines.

"You should have told us all the rules from the get-go," Donagan complains.
"Well that's the only rule really," Wilcox shrugs. "So what do you say, do you want another round?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Jonathan butts in, "Who won? And why?"

"The two of you won because they encircled a 'fag' here." Sure enough, the 'f' from 'raft' was one space away from the 'g' in 'ago'. Jonathan stares, eyes widening. Dio rolls his eyes.

"This is pointless."

"This is brilliant!" Jonathan says at the same time. "I'd like a second round!"

"Me too," Cross agrees, clapping his hands. "We won't go easy this time, alright?"

"Good, good!" Webb chimes as Wilcox clears the board and shuffles the deck. He puts an 'A' in the center slot again and passes out seven cards to each team.

"Shall we go first again?" Jonathan asks.

"No, we will," Donagan answers, setting down four letters and spelling out 'fatty'. Webb and Wilcox snicker while Dio spells out 'raggy'. Then it's 'forgot', 'art', 'foray', 'foggy', 'yay'. When 'gaff' is joined with 'foggy', Webb declares 'game set and match' yet again.

"But there's two spaces and it's backwards!" Jonathan protests.

"Tut tut," Webb smirks, "A fag is a fag, even when he's a gaff!"

"Again!" Cross demands.

"Yes, again!"

They end up playing fifteen more rounds, seven of which end prematurely because their cards are laid past the board edges. The longest word is 'oratory', seized by Donagan, with 'garrot' followed up by Jonathan. Somewhere in the middle, Cross cracks and actually spells out 'faggotry' which, according to Webb (who almost certainly made up the rule on the spot), won his team all the points. The award for worst word is easily won by Dio and his cluster of 'r'-s and 'y'-s, which he insists (albeit drunkenly) to be onomatopoeia for an animal's cry. Which animal, he refused to elucidate on, though they were all quite gone by that point.

It is a rousing success, Webb and Wilcox conclude, patting each other on the back at a job well done.

How they manage to get back to their residences, even in the mid-spring evening, is a wonder to Jonathan. Unfortunately, end of term examinations are announced soon after and, while he (and presumably Dio) would be given a slight curve, he was still expected to take the tests. And so begins a frenzied studying session led by Cross but spearheaded by Webb (who carefully explained that his parents would skin him alive, firstborn son be damned, if he came home with another third). As Yorks and Lancasters have completely different classes, Jonathan sees little of Dio in the following weeks.

Although the boys traditionally were given the option of going home for the summer months, the new dean has instituted reforms which are as follows: first and second years were allowed to return home. Third years and above were expected to stay behind and revise for their upcoming classes, with final year pupils arranging interviews with prospective universities and firms. Even though it's all for show -- most of the boys at Chichester have had their futures set out for them from the
cradle after all -- the dean emphasizes the importance of appearance, choosing a line from the deceased maestro to quote.

The boys in both classes are suitably roused and summer passes as if school were still in session.

Jonathan remembers studying more in those handful of months than he had for the past fifteen years. When he writes to his father to complain, he predictably gets a letter advising him to keep in good spirits and continuing 'fighting the good fight'. Dio has written home as well by the looks of it, the Viscount is delighted that one of his sons at least, has received top marks in all subjects.

There is a part of him that begins to fester then, a wretched black hole eating through his soul. It is jealousy mixed with resentment, but, with his inherent lack of spite, it is like a flame without fuel.

In private -- not to Cross, or to his father, or God, or heaven forbid, Dio himself -- Jonathan can admit that his older cousin makes him green with envy at times. Dio managed to make everything look so easy: Latin, Greek, English literature, even British history and politics which he knew they hadn't covered back in the manor! And here he is, fighting tooth and nail to claw to a lower second in Latin, while Dio's assignments were proudly hung from the walls.

The second fire starts with more noble intentions. Or rather, he has nothing to do with it. The nearby farmers, Cross explains, regularly burn their fields. The school has made an agreement with them to only start the flames when the wind was blowing away from the school.

This year's burning of the fields begins on the twenty-sixth of August, with the half-moon waning in the sky. Because it's the first year there are so many pupils left during the harvest, the school is kind enough to arrange an excursion to the farms, where some hundred-odd boys stand around in the middle of the night, watching the flames blaze. They huddle amongst one another, kicking and biting and kissing as soon as the caretaker wanders off.

Some of the braver ones pull their lovers into the bushes; Cross makes sure to cover Jonathan's eyes for this.

"Your cousin is calling for you," Dio interrupts, crossing over from the York's side. Jonathan is characteristically enthusiastic about seeing him; Cross leaves the two of them be.

"Jojo," Dio murmurs, leaning lazily against the fence.

Instinctively, Jonathan talks about various light-hearted subjects. Does his resentment show, he wonders, yammering on to save face.

Just like him, however, Dio has changed too. His manner of dress is much wilder, practically avant-garde, a difference made all the clearer when he went back to wearing his old outfit for Jonathan's birthday outing. He has much nicer stuff now too -- silk scarves, studded cufflinks, and old world timepieces. He's not wearing any of that tonight, as far as Jonathan can tell (though, the ink pigment of his cousin's tie is unlike anything he's seen), but there's an inexplicable restlessness to the other boy, even while he is standing still.

Sometimes, Jonathan catches Dio's gaze shifting. He can't quite describe it, though he's thought about it many a time. The closest thing he can think of is when Dio had looked at him for the first time -- when his father had brought the other boy home and Jonathan had bounded down the stairs in an enthusiastic greeting.

Dio's expression right now is something similar. It makes Jonathan sickly anxious and he can't explain why.
He grabs his older cousin's hand then, smiling, and for once, Dio acquiesces. He softens his gaze and squeezes Jonathan's hand in-turn.

Who had taken the first step, then? Jonathan can't remember. He does remember laughing gaily and being swept off his feet, an odd callback to their first Christmas together, and the other boys clapping and cheering. Some had joined along, Cross and Donagan amongst them, and some others had started up a tune.

They whirl and twirl and Jonathan finds himself thinking first, he must have gotten better because he hadn't stepped on Dio's feet, and second, how absolutely ridiculous all hundred of them must look, singing and dancing and playing and laughing in the middle of the night at the foreground of a burning field. He tells Dio this and the other boy grins back, tightening his grip and picking up the pace.

When he is looking in retrospect, he will wonder when, exactly, his rose-filled schooldays ended. It was certainly sometime in the first year. If he were to ask Dio, it would be when they arrived. If he were to ask Cross, it would be when Wagner died.

But as for himself, he dates the beginning of the end to the early morning of the day following the second fire. For wasn't it then, he reasons, when the rest of the world began to change?
Jonathan wakes with a start in the dead of the night. With a muffled cry, he tumbles off the bed, scrabbling against the floorboards and fallen sheets. He presses a hand to his mouth, forcing himself to calm down, and quickly glances about the room. He lets out a sigh of relief then, seeing that his roommates were still asleep.

It’s just a nightmare, he tells himself, glancing at his timepiece. For what reason would there be to hear a scream at this hour? And who would think to attack this secluded school in the southern countryside? Still, he pulls the curtains back a bit. The fires in the fields have been smoldered for hours, though their smoke continues to blot out the sky. The sun has not yet risen and the moon is halfway across the sky.

Just a dream, he insists, easing himself onto the bed and closing his eyes.

Try as he may, he cannot relax. He hears the ticking of the clock and feels each second pass by. For a moment, he regrets having left his many stuffed animals at home. With Danny and Erina dead, Dio in another class, and his father far away, it would have been nice, having something to hold onto. As it is, he tosses and turns for nearly an hour, before another muffled cry is heard.

You are dreaming, he repeats, pinching and patting his own cheeks. You are dreaming and you need to wake up right now.

He ends up checking his watch two more times -- once at a quarter to four and another time at half past. He probably does pass out from exhaustion and stress at some point. He must, at least, for he thinks he sees Dio walking to the York house from his windowsill at one point. When he opens his eyes again the sun has risen and the other three boys have already washed up. The Lancaster cafeteria is strangely silent, with hush-hush tones and nervous gazes all around. He sits down at the same table as usual, raising an eyebrow at the absence of Webb and Wilcox.

"They're off investigating," Cross answers without prompting.

"Investigating what?" Jonathan asks. For a joyous moment, he toys with the hope that the sound he heard had not been a hallucination.

"Both the Head and Caretaker are missing," the older boy responds, crushing Jonathan's hopes. He jabs a thumb at the Lancaster Shoulder, adding, "Which always means trouble."

Sure enough, instead of going to class, the boys are all sent back to their rooms after breakfast.

"Did anything happen last night?" Jonathan presses.

"Not that I know of. Grace, Merridew, have you guys heard anything?"

"It's too early for speculation..." Merridew groans, burying his face in the pillow.

"I heard Joestar tumbling out of bed in the middle of the night," Grace offers.

"Sorry about that," Jonathan stammers. "I had a bad dream."

"I'll say," Cross agrees, running the comb through his hair, "You look like you were up all night!"

Jonathan is saved from needing to explain by the knock on the door. Cross goes to open it and
Webb and Wilcox predictably tumble through.

"Big news!" Webb gasps.

"Yeah, it's massive!" Wilcox agrees.

"Well come out with it," Cross demands, snapping his fingers.

"Prothmore -- "

"He's dead."

There's a shock that passes through the other boys. Cross stumbles back, sitting himself down hard. He grips the armrest with one hand, covering his mouth with the other. Grace and Merridew react similarly, crossing themselves at the news. Even Webb and Wilcox, the usually gleeful bearers of bad news, look strangely shaken. Jonathan presses his lips together, keeping quiet. It's in moments like these that he remembers how much time the boys must have been spent together, here, without him. He has heard the name Prothmore mentioned before -- he is evidently enough of a deterrent to keep Webb and Wilcox from skipping supper -- but he is unable to attach a face to the name.

"Good lord," Cross murmurs, clenching and unclenching his fist. "I thought they said he was fit to stay?"

"Evidently not," Merridew scornfully replies. "You know doctors -- quacks, the lot of them!"

"They'll never tell you the truth," Webb agrees, "Remember how they said the maestro was recovering?"

"Prothmore," Wilcox begins, "Was not yet eighteen."

"When is the service? Oh god, I've yet to iron my mourning garb -- " Cross pushes himself to his feet, fretting here and there. "Webb, Wilcox, meet back in half an hour; Merridew, Grace, what the devil are you two doing, get dressed." In his rifling of the wardrobe, he turns around, locking gazes with Jonathan. "Oh," he adds, a little remorsefully, "Joestar, I'm sorry. You never met with Prothmore, did you?"

Jonathan shakes his head, not daring himself to speak.

"He was the Lancaster Head," Merridew explains.

"He was the best," Grace fiercely insists.

"We need to go mourn him," Cross explains, "We'll need to buy flowers, maybe his family will need help -- well," he laughs grimly, "Most of his inheritance will go to the Kensingtons so I suppose they'll arrange for his funeral, but..."

"Kensingtons," Merridew sneers. "They probably killed him, knowing that lot."

"Merridew, grieve quietly." He turns back to Jonathan, "You needn't come of course, especially as you didn't meet him. I wouldn't -- " he starts, and then dabs furiously at his eyes, "I wouldn't want Prothmore to live in your memory as a corpse."

"I understand," Jonathan replies, bowing his head. And he does, to a certain extent. So he keeps to himself in the corner while his three roommates dress themselves in black. Webb and Wilcox return soon after and all five of them clamber out the window and down the bay tree. The rest of
the school is on lockdown, Webb has explained, for the death of Head was something unheard of. It is the only time he speaks well of the past dean -- how he bypassed regulations to appoint the now-dead boy as Lancaster Head.

Jonathan understands, to an extent. He would not want to introduce Erina to any of his friends; he would not want her to live on in their memories as a corpse. But the boy Prothmore, he has no recollection of him. For a moment, he fears that the boy's death was what had pushed him off the bed. It's a ridiculous notion of course, for why would he hear the same cannon fire a second time? Not to mention the deceased Head had obviously fallen to some chronic illness.

He stays alone in the bedroom for the whole day, stressing over hypothetical situations and desperately reassuring himself that two moments of madness were not proof of a greater evil. He tries to read, but even his favorite classical history books fail to hold his attention.

It is only when the bell rings for lunch that he leaves the room, though he shuffles back immediately after. By the time afternoon rolls by, the Caretaker has finally returned. He whispers instructions to the Shoulder, who nods solemnly and then tells his fellow classmates to file out towards the cathedral in pairs. Cross and the others return, all red noses and puffed-up eyes, and they slip into the line.

After three hours in the cathedral, his ears are ringing with the wails of his classmates. Even the old minister had not been given a farewell of this magnitude.

He looks up then and catches the sun refracting through the stained glass at just the right angle. Only then does he remember his own losses and only then does he shed his own tears.

As the fifty-odd boys are trudging back to the residences, one of the younger ones remarks loudly on the sunset.

"I've never seen anything like it!" he shouts.

Indeed, it is as if the whole horizon has been died in red, so much so that it was impossible to distinguish land from sky.

"That's Prothmore's blood," someone else says.

In the week leading up until his burial -- and then for years after that, the sunset is permanently red. A day after the funeral, word comes from the papers of an immense volcanic explosion in the Dutch West Indies. Donagan manages to snatch up a copy from his politics lecturer; he shares it with the other boys, who crowd around, eagerly looking over his shoulder.

"The explosion was heard 5,000 kilometers away."

"Two thirds of the island blown away."

"Thirty thousand deaths and counting."

"Bodies washed up as far as Australia."

There's a drawing of the island of Krakatoa before and after the eruption. Jonathan is unable to believe his eyes.

"This is an exaggeration, I'm sure," Cross scoffs.

"Yeah," Webb concurs, "There's no way a whole island could explode."
"Perhaps 'island' is a misnomer," Donagan shrugs, "It could be a floating rock in the sea."

The five of them share a good, albeit nervous, laugh at that comment, imagining a single stone shooting out from a volcano and spelunking into the ocean.

"So it's nothing to worry about?" Wilcox reiterates.

"Of course not," Webb sniffs. "First of all, it's the Dutch, who everyone knows are the worst of the continentals. Second, most of the thirty thousand were godless savages so you might say they had it coming."

Of course, of course, the other boys chorus, and Jonathan feels sick to his stomach. He excuses himself early that day, skipping supper (before the same blood-red sunset) for the first time in order to reread the Bible. He scans the passages of Revelations in particular, looking for anything resembling an explanation, but ends up with very little. He spends another near-sleepness night, willing himself to keep from moving (for relaxing entirely seemed neigh-impossible) and screaming silently at the implications.

He is doubly surprised the next day, then, when he stumbles into the cathedral looking like the textbook definition of a lost lamb, and is greeted with a queue of a dozen other pupils, both Lancaster and York, lined up for a spot in the confessional. He steps at the back of line and is surprised to see Wilcox three spaces ahead of him.

"Don't tell the others okay?" Wilcox makes him promise, "But these sunsets have been creeping me out. Even my folks back home are seeing them."

The queue moves forward, slowly but steadily, and soon enough Jonathan finds himself turning the latch of the booth.

As usual, he finds himself tongue-tied when placed before a servant of God. It felt, somehow, that all his sins were being put on display. His envy, his greed, his sloth -- all these examples flit to the foreground of his mind.

"Father," he confesses, "I am scared. I have read the papers and the descriptions of that island seem miserable, like hell on earth." He takes a deep breath, spitting out his most pressing question. "Father -- do you think this is the start of the Second Coming?"

"My child," the prebendary's gravelly voice echoes back, "I cannot say, for I do not know. But be at peace. Live each day as if it were your last and look to Christ for guidance in all things."

'Father,' Jonathan wants very much to say, 'I am scared that I am not a good enough man to pass through the gates of the eternal kingdom.'

"Thank you," is what he says instead, bowing his head and reciting a prayer.


"I didn't think you'd wait for me," he says.

"What's your reason for going?" the other boy asks instead.

"There are people I want to meet in Heaven," Jonathan admits, "And I fear I haven't done enough to warrant entry."

He gives a thoroughly undignified squawk then, courtesy of Wilcox tweaking his nose.
"Don't worry so much Joestar," the older boy advises, "Your hair is going to fall out!"

"Besides," he continues, "If a goody-two-shoes like you doesn't make it through, what does that mean for the rest of us?"

Jonathan takes Wilcox's advice to heart, throwing himself at things he could do with a passion. Two weeks after Prothmore's death, the dean announces that a new Head will be appointed to the Lancaster Class at the start of the Michaelmas term. With his announcement comes the preparation for the new school term. The transition from third years to fourth years is an immense one -- as Cross had described previously, there was a great difference in privilege between underclassmen and upperclassmen of both classes.

A heated fortnight of preparations follow suit, beginning with new uniforms and ending with the moving of rooms. In between the two initiations, the third years are introduced, first as Lancasters and Yorks and then as Chesterians, to the upper division lecturers.

As the York class is trained in matters of state and policy, they are required to take one modern language in addition to the two ancient ones. There is the inclusion of British history and English poetry as well. Classes on oration will begin in the fifth year.

For the Lancaster class, their already-heavy athletic pursuits are doubled, though their language courses are cut back. Naturalism is added onto Mathematics; Physics and Medicine will be introduced in their fifth year. At his father's behest, Jonathan signs himself up wrestling and sprinting. He continues with equestrianism and polo of course, though he does end up dropping cricket.

With the changing of rooms, he naturally signs up to pair with Cross. Grace and Merridew have also taken a slot together, as have Webb and Wilcox. Although he last saw Dio at the start of the transition period, he figures the other boy paired up with Donagan.

It comes as a one-two punch then, when, at the end-of-break supper, Dean Richcroft announces that Dio Brando will be the Shoulder of the York class.

One of the boys screams. Another one throws his cup. But their complaints are drowned out by the other Yorkers, who eagerly greet their latest Shoulder.

The dean continues speaking, introducing the new Head of the Lancaster class as well as reiterating the names of the old Head and Shoulder, but Jonathan is unable to focus.

Dio -- the next Shoulder? But he was only a fourth year -- weren't the positions of Head and Shoulder exclusive to the final years?

He's helped back into the residences while Cross beats back the flood of curious boys eager to discover the secret behind Jonathan's cousin's success. For a while, Jonathan sits stock-still in the armchair, fingers clutched about his knees.

Cross sighs, easing himself into the opposite seat.

"You're in shock," he notes. "Don't worry, so am I. I didn't think it was possible to be nominated for either Head or Shoulder until the sixth year. Otherwise... well, I would've tried myself."

"But then... but then how did Dio get it?!"

"That's the hundred-crown question," Cross shrugs. "Why don't you ask him? He's your cousin after all."
"I don't even know him anymore," Jonathan deplores.

"Now you're just being ridiculous," the other boy sighs, patting his shoulder. "What about the night where the farmers burnt the fields? The two of you were dancing so happily then."

"Only because -- "

Jonathan stops himself, clenching his jaw. Then he remembers. "What about Donagan?" he asks, "Why didn't he try?"

"As a fourth year?" Cross laughs, "He never even considered it! Neither did I, to be honest. And between you and me, I've got a better chance of making Head than Donagan."

"What?" Jonathan stares, "Why?"

"Ah, well, Donagan is clever no doubt, and of course I respect him immensely. But he's incredibly unpopular amongst his classmates -- they call him Lord Donagan behind his back, you know? -- and though the old dean probably would have nominated him... well, now he's gone so that's that."

"But," Jonathan counters, "I thought he helped get rid of the old dean!"

"Of course he did," Cross patiently replies, "We all did."

"But why?"

"Because of what he did to Wilcox. You didn't see his back, but those lashes were wretched. If you had seen them..." Cross shakes his head, smiling ruefully, "But then, what would you expect? Donagan is the sort of fellow to choose friends over lackeys. Why do you think he doesn't mind consorting with our class?"

'Because you're here,' Jonathan is tempted to say.

He isn't given the opportunity of course; he is interrupted by another knock on the door.

"Come in," Cross beckons, and the door opens to reveal an underclassman.

"Is... is Mr. Joestar here?" the boy asks.

"Ah, yes," Jonathan stands up, smiling, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Someone from the York class wants to see you," the boy says, "He's waiting at the entrance."

Having given the message, he promptly dashes off.

Cross looks meaningfully at him.

"Well," he says, arching an eyebrow, "Here's your chance to ask."

The nerves that Jonathan had been steeling up are for naught; the person at the entrance is not Dio -- but rather, another one of the York upperclassmen.

"Joestar," he greets, inclining his chin, "Our Shoulder has sent for you."

Jonathan stares.

"Uh," he intelligently begins, "What?"
"The Shoulder," the York pupil repeats, "Your cousin. He's asked for me to bring you over."

"I can't go over!" Jonathan exclaims, "We're not allowed in the other class' residence!"

"There's been a change of rules," the other boy shrugs. "Now are you coming or not?"

Whenever Dio is concerned, Jonathan bitterly thinks, he's never given an option. Still, he kicks on his shoes and buttons his blazer, following the older boy to the York residence. There had evidently been some sort of change; no one bats an eye when the two of them walk into the manor, even as Jonathan's Lancaster emblem is fully visible. The upperclassman leads him up to the third floor of the manor, turning left at the staircase. He knocks on the hallway's end door.

"Jojo," Dio hails, lightly moving his wrist. He opens the door further, letting his cousin in, and closes it immediately.

"Dio," Jonathan responds in turn, looking about the room.

"It's a fine room isn't it?" Dio preens, sweeping his arm towards the balcony. "Certainly a step up from that four-man hellhole we started off in." He casts a glance at Jonathan and, in finding him to be lost in thought, continues airily with, "Of course I'll have another bed brought in, and the servants will bring your things up shortly."

"What?"

"The dean hasn't told you?" Dio clicks his tongue, pulling out a slip of paper, "In line with the privileges awarded to the Head and Shoulder, I've arranged for you to be my pet. It's only a formality of course, but this way you'll be allowed to commute between the two classes. It's ridiculous what traditions these people will put up with... I'll get rid of the other ones soon enough." He pauses, looking again at Jonathan, and frowns. "What?"

Jonathan shakes his head.

"What? Is the view no good?"

"No," Jonathan says, "Dio, I won't be your pet."

"It's just a formality," his cousin insists, "Think of it as a pledge of amity."

"No."

"Jojo," Dio growls, "Think about it! I'm offering you half of everything in this position -- all the privilege and prestige -- at no cost to you!" And then, when Jonathan frowns further and says nothing, Dio makes an attempt to sweeten the deal: "You're welcome to visit your friends from your old residence of course. I merely think that your grades are laughable and that you should spend more time revising. I am not so bad of a teacher, wouldn't you say? I taught you how to eat and dance after all."

"Come now, Jojo," he continues, taking Jonathan's hand, "It'll be like the old days. Surely you've missed having a balcony. And what about hot chocolate at night? I could ask the maids to get you a cup."

With deliberate slowness, Jonathan pulls his hand away.

"Dio," he repeats, voice surprisingly steady, "I do not want to be in the same class as you."
"And why not?" his cousin asks, voice taking on a dangerous tone.

"Because you're always like this!" Jonathan explodes, "Making decisions without asking me! You sent one of your classmates to *fetch* me, what do you take me for, a dog?!"

"Don't make this out to be my fault!" Dio rages in return, "You were the one who wanted to stay here! What did you expect me to do -- "

"I *expected* you to make the best of it!"

"And how is this not making the best of it?!"

"Fine!" Jonathan spits, "Fine, I admit it, you've done well! Thank you very much for calling on me, Mr. Brando, I shall leave you to your successes!"

Dio backhands him cleanly.

"You ungrateful brat! Has it ever occurred to you -- "

"-- that I might want a place outside of your shadow?!!"

When they break apart, both of them are short of breath. Dio kicks a set of drawers to the floor, swearing.

Jonathan raises a hand to his cheek. It's not bleeding, but it certainly stings. The prickling pain brings him to his senses and all the worries from the past month spring forth, easily overwhelming him.

Through the tears, he sees Dio's expression twisting and falling.

"Oh no," Dio groans, "Oh no, Jojo, don't cry."

Jonathan sucks in a deep breath, rubbing at his eyes.

"I'm -- " he gasps, "I'm fine."

In the weeks since the second fire, Dio has grown taller. Not by much, but the difference is certainly noticeable.

"I should not have hit you," he admits, "But you should see the benefits of my offer."

"I don't and I won't."

"*Father* wanted it!"

"I don't believe you!"

They're on the edge of another fight and Jonathan's cheek still hurts. He wants to punch Dio, wants to make his older cousin *hurt*. To love and hate someone with equal intensity makes his head hurt. He pulls back for a second time, trying to collect his thoughts. But no, he realizes in the nick of time, this is not about him.

He thinks of Dio then, and what he must have gone through to arrive at his current position.

There is a distinction to be made, he understands, between friends and lackeys.
"Dio," he addresses, "Are you... lonely?"

A flicker of surprise makes its way across Dio's face, though it quickly replaced by irritation.

"Don't be ridiculous," he retorts, "This is for your benefit, not mine."

Jonathan could prod, could probably follow-through for a victory. But it is late and he is tired and arguing with Dio has never ended well. So he retreats.

"I'm going," he says instead, "Good night and congratulations."
"Joestar!" Cross shouts, bursting into stables where Jonathan is tacking up his horse, "Joestar, come quick!"

"What is it?"

"The servants -- they're trying to move your stuff!"

Jonathan blanches, gratefully accepting Cross' help in cleaning up, and dashes out as well. As Cross has no doubt sprinted to relay the message, Jonathan overtakes his mentor, throwing open the front door to the Lancaster residence and taking the stairs two at a time. When he opens the door to their shared room, he finds Webb and Wilcox in the middle of a tug-of-war session with three servants.

"Joestar!" Webb and Wilcox exclaim.

"Webb, Wilcox! Thank you, I'll take it from here. And you three -- !" Jonathan demands, whirling on the servants, "What is the meaning of this? What are you doing in my room? Can't you see that's my piece of luggage?"

"Orders from the York Shoulder Mister Joestar," is the response he's given. Said servant takes out a piece of paper. It's an order to move the belongings of Jonathan Joestar, fourth year of the Lancaster Class and roommate to Leslie Cross, fourth year of the Lancaster Class, to the apartment of Dio Brando, fourth year and Shoulder of the York Class. Jonathan skims it over and then turns his head.

"I will not agree to this," he declares.

"The word of a Head or Shoulder is tantamount to law," the servant replies.

"No," Jonathan retorts, grabbing onto his luggage and yanking it out of the intruder's grasp with on firm pull, "Before being a leader of the rival class, Dio is my brother. This is not something a brother would do." He draws himself tall then, somehow managing to look down on the towering servant, and adds, "Do you really think you're in the right -- breaking into my private quarters and seizing my possessions? Aren't their proper channels for these sort of things?"

Saying this, he looks every inch the future Viscount and the servants are suitably flustered.

"No, well, that is," the one on the side stammers, "We meant no disrespect, Mister Joestar, but Mister Brando has requested -- "

"Then tell Mister Brando that my belongings, along with myself, are perfectly happy here." His tone allows for no argument and the three servants hastily excuse themselves.

When Jonathan closes the door, Wilcox gives a whoop.

"Wow, Joestar," Webb adds, clapping lightly, "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Oh gosh," Jonathan sighs, sitting down and rubbing his temples, "I don't know what came over me."

"You right told them off, that's what came over you," Webb replies. "And don't get me started on
the standards for help around the York house! *Lancaster* servants know their place!"

"More than about knowing their place, Joestar is right," Wilcox continues, "The role of pet is just a subset of faggotry. In the end, the decision rests with the faggot, not his master."

"Oh God," Cross exclaims, bursting in yet again and breathing hard. He collapses in his bed, clutching at his chest, "Sorry I wasn't of any help! I saw the Yorker servants leaving with empty hands. I take it you told them what's what?"

"Well -- " Jonathan starts.

"You should've seen Joestar then," Webb laughs, clapping his classmate on the back, "He had a tongue as sharp as a maid then!"

"Stop it Webb...!"

"No woman scorned..." Cross playfully recites. Then he sits up and stretches, taking on a serious expression. "Okay Joestar, now tell us what's happening. You came back after seeing Brando all out of sorts and now he's sent servants to get your things. What's going on?"

Jonathan grimaces.

"Dio wants me to be his pet."

"We know that," Webb replies, rolling his eyes. "But why?"

"He says he wants to tutor me," Jonathan admits, feeling especially flustered, "And that my marks are embarrassing."

"They're not that bad are they?" Cross asks. And then he remembers the sequence of near-failures and winces too. "Nevermind."

"Couldn't he just assign himself to be Joestar's tutor?" Wilcox suggests, "What's the point in dragging him out of Lancaster?"

"He misses his cousin obviously," Webb explains, rolling his eyes. He looks at a flushing Jonathan and raises an eyebrow, "You said the two of you were raised like brothers, right?"

"Yes."

"I missed Donagan terribly when we first arrived," Cross admits, "But learning to live apart is integral. We won't be children all our lives, after all." He laces his fingers, glancing between his friends, and concludes, "This is something that needs to be sorted out between yourself and your cousin. That he keeps bringing outsiders into the matter is distasteful, but, well... if he's family..." he shrugs, "Family is allowed the benefit of the doubt."

"Cross has such a soft heart," Webb sighs.

"And it is constantly bleeding," Cross shoots back.

"Thank you," Jonathan says, "Thank you for alerting me when you did, for holding onto my luggage, and for your advice." His fear of the world ending is a great help then, he thinks, for it minimizes the gravity of his own problems. So what if his cousin was better than him in every way even now? So what if he wanted Jonathan to live in his shadow? Two-thirds of an island had just been blasted apart and thirty thousand people had been killed thousands of miles away -- if that
wasn't proof of a vengeful God, then what was?

It is important to confront Dio, not for the future (which might, as he suspects, not come) but for the purposes of accountability. The idea of his older cousin ordering his house's servants left and right, sending them scurrying at the merest whim, is most unbecoming.

He is saved the effort of paying Dio a visit however, for the other boy accosts him over supper in the main dining room.

"Jojo," the York Shoulder greets, "Could I have a moment?"

"Of course," Jonathan replies, wiping his mouth before standing up. He returns Cross' smile (and ignores Webb's thumbs-up) and follows the other boy into the hallway.

"I see you've pulled rank to send the movers back," Dio accuses from the get-go.

"Said the pot to the kettle," Jonathan retorts, crossing his arms.

"Jojo," Dio laments, "Must everything be a fight to you?"

"I am not looking for a fight," Jonathan insists, "But where pride is concerned, it would be poor taste to step down."

"And yet you're still a child," Dio snorts, not letting his cousin forget the difference in their heights. Instead of pursuing that point however, he pulls out an envelope and displays the letter within.

For the second time that day, Jonathan skims through a message concerning, but not directed at, him. This one is from his father, and features the Viscount congratulating Dio on his new position as Shoulder as well as a request that Dio make some time to help Jonathan out. Academics, he is ashamed to see his father note, were not the boy's strong point. Unlike Dio, who was all strengths, no weaknesses, all set atop a flawless mask.

"So you see," Dio says, "I am only presenting you with such an opportunity at Father's behest."

"What opportunity? And I still don't believe this," Jonathan repeats, shaking his head.

"Disbelieve it all you want," Dio shrugs. "Write to Father yourself then. See what he has to say."

"I will!" Jonathan counters, stomping away.

And so begins a month and a half long correspondence between the Viscount and his heir which ends, unsurprisingly, in Dio's uncontested victory. Not only did the Viscount insist that Jonathan place himself under his academically-superior older cousin's tutelage, but he said that Jonathan's arguments of pride were "poison for the mind" at his age. You are not yet fifteen, Jonathan reads, and you are more concerned with saving face than learning? Instead of being embarrassed your older cousin is so much better than you, the Viscount continues, you should work harder! I've worked very hard to give you both such opportunities and it pains me to know that only Dio isn't squandering them!

The final nail in his coffin is when his father espouses the values of the faggot system, noting that, despite the distaste in lower circles, it was still a genuinely useful tool. Jonathan has to admit, he is extremely grateful to Cross for showing him the ropes in his first year. And, his father is right again, although Cross was the obvious choice of tutor, shouldn't Jonathan have some shame and not rely so much on the other boy?
Wallow in humbleness at the present, his father advises, so that you may walk with pride at a later day.

On the off-chance the world isn't ending -- which isn't very likely, what with the still-red sunsets and the near-permanent Bishop's Hat encircling the sun -- Jonathan can concede that his father and cousin are right. So two months into his second year at Chichester, he goes to see Dio.

Dio is exultant, partially because of hearing the words 'You were right and I was wrong' from his cousin's mouth, but also because he is eager to be living in close quarters again. He does not allow Jonathan to dwell on his errors for long, pulling the other boy up and holding him tight.

"About time," he sighs. And then he smiles, squeezing Jonathan's hands. "But I'm glad. The movers will take your things tomorrow; I'll have a second bed brought up tonight."

Jonathan nods, biting his bottom lip. Dio notices the gesture and frowns.

"What now?"

"I meant what I said back then," Jonathan confides, looking the other in the eye. "I won't stay in your shadow forever."

"Oh?" Dio chuckles, "What will you do to get out of it? I wonder Jojo..." he pets his cousin's hair, golden eyes gleaming, "Would you kill to escape?"

Predictably, Jonathan looks disgusted.

"I would never -- "

"Of course not," Dio soothes, "It was a joke in bad taste, forgive me." He hugs the other boy again, this time wrapping his arms around Jonathan's shoulders. "Don't fret so," he whispers, "For I agree with Father. Despite the teachers' best efforts, you are not reaching your full potential at the moment." He pulls away a second time, with darkened eyes and slightly-parted lips. Jonathan takes a step back, slightly unnerved, but Dio rearranges his face in seconds.

"Run along now Jojo," the older boy instructs. "And I'll see you tomorrow."

When Jonathan stumbles his way back to the Lancaster lodge, he finds Cross and the others back early from their ride. Upon hearing the news, Webb and Wilcox insist on throwing a farewell party, staunchly ignoring Jonathan's pleas to the contrary. Between themselves and Cross and Donagan, they manage to steal a whole cake from the kitchens, along with two bottles of champagne and half a jug of cider.

"I don't see the point of this," Jonathan slurs, not for the first time.

"What do you mean?" Cross replies. He lifts his head from the armrest for a second before laying it down.

"Nothing's going to change, right?"

"No, of course not. We'll still be in the same classes and you'll still sit with us for supper and church. On that note... did you know Clare was asked to be an upperclassman's pet in our second year? It was the funniest thing!"

"Shut up, Lee," Donagan snaps without menace.
"Why didn't you?" Jonathan asks, making a poor effort at sitting upright.

"Because I didn't like him."

"Lord Donagan has his eyes on someone else," Webb trills.

"Ah, yes, always someone else!" Wilcox agrees.

They chat amicably (but not soberly) well into the night and when Donagan is helping Jonathan help Cross get back to their residence, the first flakes of snow begin to fall.

Cross is genuinely teary the next morning and his display of melancholy affects Jonathan too. Jonathan apologizes for leaving him, Cross apologizes for being a terrible roommate, and the two of them tearfully make a promise to write to each other at least once a week. For once, Dio is in the same party as Webb and Wilcox -- that is, on the verge of gagging. With an impractical air of theatrics, the parade of Shoulder, Pet, Mentor, Jester Pair, and servants makes its way to the York residence, where Cross parts ways and Jonathan sobs every step of the way.

And then Dio helps him unpack his luggage for a second time.

When the bell for supper rings, Jonathan follows Dio to the dining hall and promptly sits himself at Cross' table. A long question-and-answer session is started on the state of York residence with queries ranging from the color of the drapes to the cleanliness of the public areas.

All in all, it is as Cross had said: not much changes. Jonathan still has all his classes with his mentor and Webb and Wilcox; he still sits at supper and in church with the three of them and Donagan, and all five of them still race horses and play card games three out of seven days a week.

For Jonathan, the main benefit of sharing a room with Dio is being able to talk with his older cousin again. Dio makes true on his tutoring promise, walking Jonathan through their shared subjects for two hours each day, and Jonathan is reminded of how diligent his older cousin is. There is something to said for the mechanical methodology behind Dio's revision habits: practice, practice, and practice yet again. Jonathan, unfortunately, does not have the stamina for such sessions -- by the ninety minute mark, his head feels heavy with information and the coherency of his answers plummet.

Although Dio is not a better teacher by any means when compared to their formal tutors, Jonathan begins to understand the subjects at a more fundamental level after their conversations. The increase in marks is so much so that the dean himself writes back to the Viscount, congratulating him on the academic improvements of his heir.

Mr. Joestar is delighted of course and invites both boys back to the manor for the Christmas holiday. Unfortunately, as the commute is so long and the break so short, they spend three nights in the manor and three and a half weeks in transit. The week-long journey between the western and eastern southern reaches of England has more than doubled with the bizarre weather conditions. The press reports that it is four degrees colder and the snow is half a foot thicker. The banks of the Thames have had to be lengthened what with the rising of the tides.

With the coming of winter however, the once-red sunset takes on a nearly-pinkish hue. Certainly, the sky and clouds are as unusual as ever and the sun (whenever it can be seen) keeps its halo, but the gradual return of normalcy calms Jonathan significantly. Faced with a newfound determination to live well and make the best of all situations, he and Dio return to Chichester, reunite with the other boys, and continue their studies.
Under Dio's continued tutelage, Jonathan manages to maintain his marks. Though he's not in the top five of any of his courses, he is also no longer in the bottom third which, to Mr. Joestar, is victory enough.

His own growth spurt starts around the time of his sixteenth birthday. In February, when the snow had not yet melted, Dio had been six inches taller than him; by the middle of April, when the grasses have begun to sprout, the difference shrinks down to two and a half.

This year, the Viscount has needed to travel to Scotland to renegotiate a trade route. He sends a basket filled with Jonathan's favorite foods to the cathedral instead. Jonathan is delighted of course and eagerly shares the treats with his cousin and friends. As his birthday falls on a Friday that year, Webb and Wilcox again arrange an impromptu party, this time introducing a new and improved (which of course, translated into 'even more vulgar') version of their previous belles lettres game.

There is a new fashion amongst the Continentals for elaborate cakes and candles, a tradition the boys have started with Donagan's eighteenth birthday and continued for Jonathan's sixteenth. And so it is that Cross procures, with the help of Dio, a marvelous German chocolate cake and fifteen tapered candles. The five of them sing an off-beat version of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' with an underclassman quartet providing background music.

Jonathan is pleased past the point of tears, thanking everyone and everything.

It is understandable then, for his having been lulled into complacency. For, Jonathan reasons, how could God, in making a world as wonderful as this, wish to forsake it?

The dust remaining in the atmosphere makes for a glorious series of spring afternoons, punctuated with a rainbow a week.

Just two weeks later however, he finds himself wanting to die of shame. He remembers waking up and eating breakfast with Dio, remembers meeting Cross, Webb, and Wilcox right after and the four of them heading to arithmetic. But when he comes to again, he's tucked into one of the sickbeds and Dio is hovering by his side.

Cross explains that Jonathan had passed out halfway through the lecture and though smelling salts had successfully revived him, he seemed to be tongue-tied at first. Throughout the explanation, Jonathan stares straight ahead, fists clenched about the sheets.

Dio pulls him out of his reverie then, snapping his fingers before pinching Jonathan's cheek.

"Don't dwell on it," his older cousin commands.

Jonathan nods solemnly and vomits up his breakfast seconds later. A nurse is called, the doctor is rung for. His temperature and pulse are taken; both are found to be normal. It's a fit of nerves, the doctor concludes, perfectly normal for adolescents. And then he mixes up a calming tonic for Jonathan to drink. At Dio's insistence, the doctor allows his patient to rest in his normal bed, prescribing one day of bedrest and limited physical activity for the rest of the week.

Later that evening, after a meal of porridge and milk and honey, Jonathan lets Dio comb his hair, wash his face, tuck him in, and read to him from his favorite anthology of humorous stories. Midway through a tale involving a scheming fox and an even trickier rabbit, he works up the courage to ask.

"Hear what?" Dio questions in-return.

"I don't know. Something loud? A sound similar to... well... gunfire?" It's ridiculous and his own
explanation only adds to the absurdity. Jonathan ends up shaking his head, "Nevermind, it's nothing."

"You're tired," his cousin tuts, closing the book and pressing his hand to Jonathan's forehead. "I shouldn't have had you transcribe so many passages."

Jonathan closes his eyes and gives a low moan. Dio removes his hand soon afterwards, returning the armchair to its place before blowing out the candles.

The next day, the cafeteria in the York residence is abuzz. A tremor of the earth had rocked Colchester the previous morning -- though no casualties were reported yet, over one thousand buildings were damaged -- amongst them five churches. Two villages were completely demolished and hundreds of people were unaccounted for.

The thought of thousands of his countrymen without homes, of two villages being razed to the ground, sends Jonathan into a relapse.

"I think," he whispers, "The Devil is speaking to me."

Dio looks at him as one looks upon the temporarily-insane. Which is to say he raises an eyebrow and then turns the page.

"For it can't be God," Jonathan continues, babbling, "Why would God speak to me? I wish the old prebendary was here; I wish the old reverend was here. The chaplain here thinks I'm only looking for attention." He forces himself to sit up, looking his cousin in the eye, "Dio, tell me. Am I going mad? Why is it I can hear these things no one else can?"

"What exactly are you hearing?" Dio ends up asking, finally closing his book.

"Shouts. Well, shouts and gunfire. I heard shouting when that island in the Dutch West Indies exploded and gunfire yesterday."

The weight of his confession sinks in and his face pales. "Dio -- please -- please, you must not tell anyone else."

Dio clicks his tongue, reaching out to press the crease between Jonathan's brows. He presses and presses until eventually, Jonathan lies back down. With a heavy hand, Dio covers Jonathan's eyes. He strokes Jonathan's left wrist with his other hand, blowing softly.

"No," he answers, "I do not think you are mad. If anything, you are mad for thinking the Devil would speak to you. Your worries are ridiculous, as they always are. Remember what your father said: you are here to learn, first and foremost, how to be a good person."

"But am I?" Jonathan presses, "Am I good person?"

"Of course you are."

Suitably reassured, Jonathan closes his eyes, lashes fluttering against Dio's palm. He slumps fully against the pillow, relaxing his limbs, and allows his grip on the blankets to slacken.

Gingerly, after Jonathan is most certainly asleep, Dio takes the other boy's hand, twining their fingers and pressing Jonathan's knuckles to his lips.

"My simple slow-witted cousin," he murmurs, "Always worrying about such stupid things."
His eyes, however, betray an immeasurable fondness.
Discussions discouraged in the library

It is as Dio had said: Jonathan wakes the next morning with a clearer mind and lighter conscience. He thanks his older cousin for the counseling session over breakfast, eating quickly so that he had time to run to the cathedral for an early morning prayer. Later on, he learns that the earthquake had had two human casualties: a fisherman who had been swept out to sea and a schoolchild who had been playing hide-and-seek in a now-collapsed building. He prays for those two victims as well and writes to his father, confiding his worries for the future and how scared he was to face the Holy Father in the event of a Second Coming.

The Viscount promptly responds with a thoughtful, albeit wistful, letter of his own, recounting his years in boarding school and how he had had similar concerns. As with all the great questions concerning life and how to live it, there is no single correct answer. The world is built from 'how's' and not 'why's', his father recites. The letter concludes with a now-familiar refrain, urging Jonathan to concentrate ever harder on his studies. For, of this his father was certain, having a solid head filled with solid knowledge was the best sort of start -- regardless of what conclusion Jonathan reached or what career he would pursue, education would help in all fields.

Jonathan understands this, truly, and it is heartening to know his father went through similar pains. The idea of the Viscount George Joestar being scared of going to hell, or fretting over becoming a real man, is laughable. But in laughing at the thought, Jonathan sees his near-saintlike father in a more human light.

He dedicates himself to his studies then, and by the start of the exam season, he finds that he can read for three hours at a time and still have the capacity to process the text. His preliminary marks have been steadily rising, so much so that before the examination period, he is finally in the upper third of his class. Dio shakes his hand in congratulations; Webb and Wilcox (still in the bottom third) beg him to tutor them in the non-classical subjects.

"Of course," he says, immensely flattered by the request and eager for a chance to help his friends out. When he tells Dio of the new arrangement, his older cousin merely snorts, snidely adding that Jonathan had a sorry penchant for lost causes. Well, Jonathan thinks, Dio can be the pessimist -- he is still head-and-shoulders above the majority of his class after all.

And so begins his tutorial sessions with Webb and Wilcox.

Even with Cross helping out and Donagan supervising, it goes as well as a revision meeting concerning Webb and Wilcox would go. All five boys are howling with laughter in the first hour -- Wilcox has taken to playing pranks on the Yorkish underclassmen with results varying from lackluster to wildly successful -- and Jonathan doesn't even get through the basics of taxonomy. Still, Jonathan perseveres, remembering Dio's efforts in tutoring him, and when the exam results are in, everyone in their group is ranked somewhere in the top ten. Cross and Dio are at the top of their classes; Jonathan is fifth and Donagan is third; Webb and Wilcox are ten and eight respectively.

"Yes!" Webb whoops, jumping up in delight after seeing the results board.

"Eighth place, capital!" Wilcox agrees. The two of them do a giddy little song and dance.

"Joestar!" they greet, when Jonathan comes in to see the rankings.

"Joestar, thank you so much!"
"Congratulations to you too!" Jonathan beams after seeing the results.

"Now Father will buy me that stallion!"

"And I'll be allowed to go home for Christmas!"

"Wow Joestar," Cross muses, making his way down the stairs and squinting up at the results, "I didn't think you had it in you! Third place and getting these two clowns into the top ten? Very nice, very nice."

"It wasn't much," Jonathan insists, scratching his cheek, "In fact, I think I learned a lot helping you two revise, so I should be the one thanking you."

"No, no," Wilcox says with a shake of his head.

"Yeah, this one was all you Joestar." Webb tosses a glance at Cross, "I wish I could say the same for a certain Mister Cross..."

"Hey, I sat with you guys!"

"Sleeping through it!"

"So I was tired!" Cross rolls his eyes, "Besides, Joestar is much better at explaining things. Hey, if all else goes to hell, you could seriously be a lecturer!" Then he catches himself and winces. "I didn't mean it that way, of course. I'm sure you'll have better things to do."

"Better things to do?" Webb echoes.

"He means better than teaching us."

"Oh no, it was a pleasure!" Jonathan grins, putting his hands up. "And, well, anything to keep you two from gluing the first years' doors shut a second time."

"So you mean we should have glued their trousers together?" Webb asks, brightening.

"What?! No, I meant -- "

"Relax Joestar, relax," Webb laughs, clapping him on the back. And only now does Jonathan notice that he's no longer the shortest in the group. In fact, he's second to Cross -- and he's only been beaten by an inch or two. "I know what you mean. You were great though -- if you do end up teaching, I'll definitely hire you for my sons!"

"The Jonathan Joestar School?" Cross jokes, "I like the sound of that."


"Wilcox...!" Jonathan exasperates.

"Alright, alright, we've wasted enough time studying as it is," Webb announces, "What say we grab Donagan and Brando and have ourselves a celebration? For the future Head of the York house," he motions to Cross, "And for the future dean of our children!" And then, ignoring all protests, he and Wilcox troop out the door and back the same way Jonathan came. Somehow or another, they manage to wrest a tray of teacakes from the York maid (who blushes prettily at their sudden attentions) and a decanter of red wine. Dio and Donagan are called out from their residence and they reconvene at their usual meeting spot in the pink. Wilcox has pasted glue on the seats of all the chairs. He fails completely at maintaining his innocence, slipping out of his trousers and
sprinting away while the other boys scramble to give chase.

Needless to say, all six of them are given lines and detention and additional chores for roughhousing and indecent exposure, summer break and top-of-the-class status be damned. In the middle of scrubbing tiles in the cathedral's storage, Dio reiterates that he hates Chichester in its entirety but especially the other boys. And Jonathan ignores him, humming merrily while wiping down the silverware.

While they're serving out their sentences (and Webb and Wilcox have somehow gotten out of writing lines), their classes begin the transition period again, this time closing the gap between fourth and fifth years. Out of all their marks, fifth year is the most important, their lecturers say, for it is the years universities and employers will look at. Of course their results don't really matter in the grand scheme of things, he readily admits, but one should always strive to do one's best.

This is an amenable enough tenet for most of the boys: after competing, playing, dining, and hunting, what else was there to do but study?

For Dio and Donagan, this means picking up a second modern language. For Cross, Jonathan, Webb, and Wilcox, this means cracking open introductory texts on medicine and physics, as well as reviewing past notes on classical history.

In the beginning of September, three weeks before the start of the first term, Mr. Joestar pays the boys an unannounced visit.

"Jojo, Dio!" he greets, hugging and kissing the two of them. "My, how you've grown! Jojo, I'm so sorry for missing your sixteenth birthday -- Dio, I'm sorry I'll have to miss your seventeenth."

"What?!" Jonathan exclaims, "You mean we won't be going back for Christmas?"

"No, unfortunately not. But I'm hear to give you fantastic news," Mr. Joestar puffs out his chest, clearly proud. "You know the situation in northern Africa, correct?" And then, because only Dio nods, he explains: "Well, it's absolutely dreadful. One of Britain's best generals has been trapped in a Sudanese city. And this old man here," he pats his own chest, "Has been asked by the Queen herself to help in the expedition to bring him back."

Dio misses a beat then. Jonathan, thankfully, has enough enthusiasm for both of them.

"Father!" he cheers, throwing his arms around the Viscount, "Oh, that's such wonderful news! Congratulations!"

"Congratulations," Dio smiles, clapping quietly.

"Thank you, thank you," the Viscount answers, grinning from ear to ear. "I wasn't the first pick in candidates admittedly, and I'll only be going as a vicecommander, but it's very thrilling! I did come, after all, from a military academy -- back then, public schools didn't have many courses to pick from -- so we'll see if I remember anything from those days."

"Oh Father -- congratulations!" Jonathan repeats, letting go and clapping his hands too.

"When will you be setting off?" Dio asks, taking care to smile as well.

"In a weeks' time, unfortunately. We've been given enough funds for four months but, well, General Wolseley, ah, that's the man in charge of the expedition, he says that we should expect three months at the least."
"The dark continent..." Jonathan whispers, eyes sparkling, "Father, will you bring us back a souvenir?"

"I'll see if there are any trinket shops in Egypt," Mr. Joestar jokes, ruffling his son's hair. And then, with a grunt, he picks both boys up, one in each arm. Dio squawks; Jonathan squeals. Mr. Joestar spins them around twice before setting them down. He's short of breath and his cheeks are red, but his eyes are glimmering with enough enthusiasm to rival his son.

"I will miss you both very much," he adds, dabbing at his eyes. "I've left the estate in the hands of Duke Kensington. Have you met his sons, speaking of which? I know they're both students here. Gorgeous boys, the last I remember seeing of them. Anyways, here is some spending money," he gives the boys fifteen gold crowns -- pinching Jonathan's nose when the boy's eyes widened at the sum, "I hope you'll buy each other something nice for Christmas."

"Lord Joestar!" the carriage driver shouts, "We must make haste!"

"Oh, drat," Mr. Joestar sighs, hugging his sons yet again.

"Father, you'll write, won't you?"

"Whenever the postman comes! Now promise me you'll be good children, make sure to say your prayers every night."

"We promise," the boys chorus.

"Good, good. And know that I love you dearly and will miss you every day."

"I'll miss you too Father," Jonathan replies.

The back-and-forth of hugs and kisses continues for a couple minutes more. Then the driver cracks his whip and Mr. Joestar rights himself, patting the boys' shoulders before dashing into the carriage. He rolls down the window and waves goodbye, and Jonathan dashes after him, shouting and waving in turn. It is only when the carriage disappears past the horizon and the gates roll shut that he stops running, leaning against a tree trunk to catch his breath.

By the time he returns to the Lancaster residence, Dio is already preparing for supper. Because his father's visit had been such an in-and-out whirlwind, Jonathan has a delayed reaction to the Viscount's enlisting. Indeed, when Cross asks him why he looked out of sorts, he immediately answers that he's nervous about fifth year courses. It seemed like the obvious reason back then. But the reality of the situation does settle in and when he realizes what his father has signed up for, it hits him hard.

"What are you doing?" Dio demands, snatching the letter from Jonathan's hands.

"No," Jonathan starts, "No, don't -- "

"What is the meaning of this?" his cousin presses, frowning, "Please come back, I fear for your safety," he reads, "Do you have any idea what you're writing?!"

"I wasn't going to send it!" Jonathan retorts. He snatches the letter back and crumples it up, throwing the wad of paper in the bin, "I was just -- I was just organizing my thoughts."

"Your father," Dio notes, "Is going to be a hero. Are you so selfish that you would stand in his
To be the son of a hero... Jonathan's chest clenches up. Not trusting himself to speak, he shakes his head.

The news of the Nile Expedition, as the press dubs it, makes its way to Chichester soon enough. A fortnight later, when the boys are all gathered for the first supper of the term, everyone knows of the Viscount Joestar who will be serving as the vicecommander to the celebrated General Wolseley and their glorious brigade, five thousand strong, to rescue the noble and gallant General Gordon from the clutches of the bloodthirsty rebels. Weekly bulletins are dispatched reporting of their progress.

By the time the successful rendezvous has been made with the Canadian voyageurs, it is the end of October. Some of the first years gather up their courage to ask Jonathan for an autograph. Surprised, and more than a little flattered, he easily acquiesces. Cross snorts with laughter, nearly falling from his seat. He does fall off then when Wilcox reveals himself to be General Gordon's staunchest supporter, subsequently declaring that if Jonathan's father had any hand in the amazing General's rescue, that Wilcox would kiss Jonathan's robe.

This sudden surge in popularity -- where even the Head of the Lancaster class stopped to bid him good-day -- comes as a surprise and Jonathan is not unaffected by it. But he does not let it get to his head, remembering his cousin's words and his own promise. He would be his own man some day, known as someone other than the son of Lord Joestar or the cousin of the youngest York Shoulder.

But he does, however, begin to take an interest in the news. British politics and history are exclusive to the York class of course, as Classical and modern warfare was exclusive to the Lancaster class, but it does not mean the library is sectioned off. Wilcox is of great help here, proudly reciting Generals Gordon and Wolseley's long list of accomplishments. From Burma to Crimea, India to China, Canada to Sudan -- these men seemed to have fought all over the world!

More than being proud of being his father's son (for he had always been proud of this), Jonathan is proud to be British. How wonderful it is, he thinks, to be a citizen of such a grand empire, that five thousand would volunteer to save one!

One night, he dreams of his father in military regalia, a golden noble force sweeping down the Nile. He wakes with tears in his eyes and swears, as soon as Dio is awake to hear him, that he, too, shall enlist in the Navy as soon as he's graduated.

Dio calls him a variety of names then: clumsy oaf, entitled brat, delusional child, to name a few, but Jonathan has long grown used to his cousin's tongue. He smiles in turn, reassuring Dio that he would improve, that there would be time still to improve. It's the logical career choice, he reasons, as he wants to do good for the greater world.

Everyone else, friends and teachers alike, congratulate him on his new goal.

You'll be just like your father, they say.

His father, who has sent two letters reporting first-hand the journey down the Nile. How long the ocean voyage was and how wide the Nile seemed. How the same zoological-like curiosity which the other men directed towards the locals was directed in-turn towards them. They're really very clever, his father writes, and absolutely nothing like the stories. The other boys flock to Jonathan's table whenever he receives a letter, eager to have snippets read aloud.

Jonathan receives his third letter on the second of December. Unlike the previous ones, this one has
no envelope and the seal is already broken. His father writes that conditions are worse than expected, that the company has been ambushed twice. Wolseley is of course, true to his epithet, and successfully escapes both ambushes, but the soldiers are tired and scared. The shift in tone is so jarring, Jonathan doesn't understand at first. He brings the letter to Dio, asking his older cousin if he could make more sense of it.

Dio's eyes flit across the cheap parchment. He purses his lips and falters for a moment. Then he hands the letter back to Jonathan, saying that it was what it was and there was no additional sense to be made.

It is the last message Jonathan receives from his father.

Christmas break begins and the other boys return to their homes. Right before the new year, the post announces that all communication with the Nile Expedition and the city of Khartoum has been lost. That the telegraph lines have been cut and the messengers have been accosted. There is an explicit description of the retrieved corpse of a messenger -- all swollen, infested, bloody, smelling of sewage -- and Jonathan nearly vomits.

To think of his father... treated in such a manner.

"Keep faith," Dio advises, fingers brushing against his cheek. Once again, they are the same height.

And so Jonathan goes to the cathedral.

Come Christmas day and he reluctantly partakes in the festivities. Dio has bought him a wonderful fur-lined coat; Jonathan had forgotten entirely. He tries to give all fifteen crowns to his older cousin but is understandably rebuffed. Throughout the feast, he picks at his food, and though the chef has gone all-out with desserts, so much so that each of the twenty remaining students could have a triple portion, Jonathan cannot stomach more than a spoonful.

The days drag on, there is no news, and Jonathan is too wrought with worry to continue studying.

The break ends and their other classmates come back, and still, there is no news.

By the end of January, Dio has given up, asking Cross for help. But Jonathan will not be helped. He spends his time in class sitting straight ahead, alone with his demons, and any spare time practically living on his hands and knees in the cathedral.

"Please," he whispers, pressing his cracked lips to the altar, "Please, please, please, please."

On the last day of the month, the dean sends the Lancaster Shoulder to usher Jonathan into his office. Once seated, the dean motions for the older boy to leave, then gets up and locks the door.

"Mister Joestar," Dean Richcroft addresses. He pulls out a freshly-sent telegraph and passes it to the boy. "I've just received this missive from the Secretary of War. Wolseley's expedition arrived two days too late. General Gordon was killed; the city of Khartoum was taken. The press have been asked to delay the story, I expect the Prime Minister will want to make an official announcement."

"And my father?" Jonathan asks. "What of my father?"

The dean lowers his head, making the cross.

"Missing in action, possibly killed."
Jonathan grips at the armrest, leaning forward to rest his face between his hands. A most unseemly wail makes its way out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry Mister Joestar," the dean quietly appends. "He was a good man."
Absences permitted for illness and bereavement

For Jonathan, everything is a blur in the months following the failed Nile Expedition. He remembers a smattering of moments, sorted chronologically, yet he is unable to connect them. People speak to him, they touch him, they try to move him. He wordlessly complies, much like an automaton of flesh and blood, wishing only for them to leave him alone.

He cannot, try as he may, remember the last words he had exchanged with his father. Had he told the man that he would be missed? That he loved him? That there wasn't a day Jonathan didn't find himself grateful to be his son? Jonathan can't remember and the possibility that he had failed to part properly, that he had been too busy rejoicing to say good-bye, the idea is too much to bear.

Dio is the one sent to fetch him from the dean's office.

Cross is the one sent to drag him to class.

"Come on Joestar," he remembers the older boy pleading, shaking his shoulders and pulling on his hand, "You've come so far, are you really giving up now?"

"You're not allowed to be here," Jonathan murmurs blearily, "This is the York house."

"Joestar," Cross whispers, with the undercurrent of fear in his tone, "Joestar, we're in the Cathedral."

This is how he always is, Jonathan thinks, making people fret over him while wasting opportunities hand over fist. This is how his father must have felt, affectionate certainly, but even more so exasperated. It is so obvious what he needs to do, he hears someone else -- Donagan, possibly? -- say. He needs to get dressed and wash up and go to class again. He needs to catch up on lost work and help Webb and Wilcox maintain their marks.

He needs to care, but he does not.

In the third week of his convalescence, the dean himself comes to the York residence to see him. He talks patiently on how Jonathan has every right to grieve, but three weeks was excessive. Were he in better shape, Jonathan would likely have fought back. Who was the dean to tell him how long he was allowed to feel sad? What right did the other man have, to compare the other student's loss of a nebulous hero with loss of the man Jonathan had shared every supper with from infancy to adolescence?

Yet the temptation to speak is absent altogether. Instead, he maintains his vision and, after a while, the dean sighs and stands up.

Later on, the eldest son of Duke Kensington, a final year pupil of the York class, comes calling. As he explains to Dio (for Jonathan is still uninclined to respond), the late Viscount had put his father in charge of the Joestar estate. The Duke, then, would like to see Jonathan and Dio. All the arrangements are to be made without their involvement and soon enough, the servants have packed their bags and parcels and loaded them into the waiting carriage.

Cross tackles him a teary hug, and for the first time, Jonathan wants to say something.

"Sorry," is all he manages to get out, before Dio is helping him into the cart.

When they reach the winter estate of Duke Kensington, the Duke himself greets them in the lobby.
He mistakes Jonathan for Dio and vice-versa in beginning for, as he makes no effort of hiding, Jonathan was practically the spitting image of the Duke's boyhood fancy. He launches into a narrative of his failed pursuits of the Joestar's only daughter and how protective the late Viscount had been, and throughout the story, all Jonathan can think of is how little he actually knew of his father.

The Duke is extremely sympathetic to Jonathan's grief, noting that the boy was allowed to take as much time as he needed to recover. He sends a telegram to the school without a delay, noting that the boys would be under his care, and even offers to call for a carriage to send the two of them back to the Joestar manor.

Though Dio is amenable, Jonathan is anything but. He gives a vehement no, the most he's said in days, and the Duke does not bring the subject up again.

It is Dio, then, who asks about the inheritance. The Duke explains that Mr. Joestar had written for his estate to be divided in half when the boys came of age, with the title of Viscount going to Jonathan. Of course, the Duke continues, it was possible to rally in court for a special circumstance -- the two of them had, after all, lost their father to a war. But Jonathan shakes his head, scurrying off, and the inheritance too, becomes an unspeakable thing.

There are many unspeakable things in those months. Any news about the Dark Continent for one. To mention Generals Gordon or Wolseley for another. And if his father's name is mentioned, Jonathan will leave the room without a word.

He is being a child, he knows, a child incapable of accepting loss. People live and people die, he knows, ashes to ashes and whatnot. But the death of his father -- the pointless death of his father? This, he cannot accept.

In the three months he spends at the Kensington estate, the Duke is there for maybe three weeks. At most. The Kensington's wealth comes from their monopoly on shipping routes in the now-peaceful Crimean, the Duke is subsequently on business trips more often than not. But he does tell the servants to listen to Dio and Jonathan as if they were his sons, and there is talk that the Duke Kensington plans to adopt the son and nephew of his unrequited old flame.

The rumors pass by Jonathan's head.

Most nights, he cries himself to sleep.

"What is it you want?" Dio asks him one day. In a rare moment of clarity, Jonathan had dressed and washed himself and had even gone down for breakfast. It is in the small things, like watching Dio eat, which remind him of his loss. His father had had impeccable table manners, Jonathan remembers, and in remembering, he crumples down.

Dio leads him back to his bedroom and Jonathan begs him to stay.

His older cousin complies, Jonathan will never forget, how Dio, who hates human contact and other people in-general, allows Jonathan to crawl into his lap, wrapping his arms around the older boy's neck and crying pitifully into his chest. He is seventeen years old now, taller than most boys his age and growing still, and he knows it is shameful -- to be reduced to such a childlike state.

Rather than reproaching or condemning, Dio merely strokes his hair, shifting his legs to make room.

After Jonathan has made a mess of the other boy's shirt, he rolls off, shifting slightly so that his
head was pillowed against Dio's thigh.

"The title and deeds," he whispers, squeezing his eyes shut, "You can have them."

Dio chuckles, pulling out his handkerchief and dabbing at his younger cousin's eyes.

"And what of you Jojo?" he asks, stroking Jonathan's cheek, "What will be left for you?"

Jonathan laughs a broken laugh.

"What is left for me?" he retorts. "Everything I've ever loved has been taken."

"I would not let you die," his cousin murmurs, "Not like this."

There is a conviction in his tone that makes Jonathan shiver.

But as Dio does not pursue the conversation, the familiar carding of fingers through his hair eventually lulls Jonathan to sleep.

Fast forward to the next month, and Duke Kensington returns with a familiar face. Jonathan and Dio are in the study when the servants pull them out and away, urging them towards the parlor.

Unable to believe his eyes, Jonathan drops to a dead faint.

When he wakes again, he is back in his bedroom in the Kensington estate. His father's wrinkled hand is pressed against his forehead. The Viscount is still wearing his wife's wedding ring.

"Father?" he asks, hating how small his voice sounded.

"Jojo," the Viscount greets. "Jojo, how good it is to see you again."

With a cry, Jonathan sits up, leaping into his father's open arms.

"Father," he sobs, "Father, I didn't think I would make it to Heaven..."

"Jojo, what are you on about? I'm still alive and so are you," his old man pinches his cheek, standing up and twirling his nearly-adult son, "I know I've made you worry, but you shouldn't have written me off so quickly!"

Dio comes running and Mr. Joestar lifts him up too and in this moment, they are a family again.

"Kensington," Mr. Joestar says as soon as they're downstairs, "I thank you for taking care of them and giving them a place to stay, but you've been far too indulgent! Four months without school because you thought I was dead? If these boys really were to inherit now, how would they manage their finances?"

"I'm already a sorry enough father for my sons," Duke Kensington shrugs.

"Actually," Jonathan admits, laughing nervously, "It's more like five months."

"I've kept in contact with the others," Dio sniffs. "Jojo, unfortunately, is quite behind."

"Aaagh! And exams are next month!"

"I expect you'll be sending the boys back to school?" Duke Kensington asks.

"Yes, prepare a carriage for them, will you?"
"But Father...!

"Jojo, I'm very happy to see you -- Dio, you too -- but now that you can safely stop grieving, it's extremely important you go back to school." Rather than arguing, Jonathan wraps his arms around his father, furiously shaking his head.

"Jojo," Dio sighs, "Don't be such a child."

"Once an older sibling, always an older sibling, eh?" the Viscount grins. A servant from the Duke enters then, saying that a carriage would be pulling up within the hour. The Duke instructs the servants to pack the boys' belongings, while Mr. Joestar sits his son and nephew down for a talk.

"Now," he begins, awkwardly clearing his throat, "Regarding my survival and delayed arrival, as you'll expect, there's a sordid story behind it. I'm to report to Wolseley later today actually, and probably Parliament right after."

Jonathan furrows his brows.

"What do you mean?"

"I do not regret my decisions, but I believe I should be held accountable for them." He tightens his jaw, adding, "I do not mean to alarm you, Jojo, Dio, but it is very likely that I will be reprimanded."

"But why?" Jonathan persists, "Aren't you a hero, Father?"

Mr. Joestar laughs, an oddly hollow sound, and shakes his head.

"Jojo, my boy, there are no heroes in war." He stands up, as the clop-clop-clop of horses can be heard in the grand entrance, and motions for the boys to follow. "It is because of Duke Kensington's support that Chichester has allowed you back. As it stands, it is possible the Crown will take away the family title. I'm very sorry about this, and any change in lifestyle that you two may experience, but I want you to know -- "

Jonathan interrupts him, initiating another embrace. He squeezes tight this time.

"Father," he reassures, "I know you're a good man. You are alive and well and I could not ask for more. Even if the Queen sends us to the streets, I will not stop being proud -- proud that you are my father."

"A living parent is better than a dead one," Dio quietly agrees.

The unconditional support sends tears to Mr. Joestar's eyes. He hugs both boys again, giving them another immense allowance, and promises that he will write to them as soon as the courts have decided his fate.

The carriage ride back passes largely in silence, broken by one brief conversation.

"Thank you," Jonathan says, earnest as ever to give credit, "If it weren't for you Dio, I would have given up hope."

His cousin looks at him with an indecipherable expression before it melts into something softer.

"Think nothing of it," Dio mutters, turning to look back out the window, "Your father's return was a surprise to me too."

Jonathan manages to drag it out for a couple minutes, asking how the other boys were doing. But
as Dio is intent on giving curt responses, he gives the other boy his space.

By the time they pass through the gates of Chichester again, the news from London has already reached the school. As class is still in session, the caretaker of the York house helps them settle in. As it turns out, even the Duke of Kensington's influence is insufficient in maintaining order: in his absence, Dio has lost his position as Shoulder. Jonathan is sent back to Lancaster as a result. Cross, of course, is exultant to see him again, and Webb and Wilcox manage to cobble together enough sweets and savories for another impromptu party.

And Jonathan laughs, glad to be back.

The Viscount's trial takes place in the middle of the exam season. Shuffling between class, the other pupils whisper amongst each other. Jonathan makes every effort not to hear, reminding himself how grateful he was -- how grateful he would be for time immemorial -- to have his Father: back, safe, alive.

Judged by a jury of peers, the Viscount Joestar is found guilty of desertion as well as aiding and abetting the enemy. Although neither his title nor his estate are taken away, he is dishonorably dismissed from his rank and made to pay the Crown a fine of ten thousand pounds.

Jonathan later discovers, though not from the lips of his father, that the Viscount had prioritized the safety of native women and children over the most expedient crossing of the Nile. This, the papers conclude, was why General Wolseley's expedition had arrived too late. The press calls for blood; Parliament, in a bind of popularity and finances, is quick to agree.

Though he tries not to -- and though his friends actively hide the information from him -- Jonathan ends up reading pages and pages of articles defaming his father.

It says something then, that he is able to maintain a cheerful demeanor, going on to rank fourth in the class, three spots behind Cross, despite having missed five months of material.

During the examination season, Dio makes himself scarce. He intends to win back his position, he explains when Jonathan asks, and will not settle for anything less.

He leaves his older cousin be, reasoning that five months of being stuck at the hip would leave anyone tired. He has not been good company in his grief, that much he knows for certain. And then he remembers how Dio had dragged him out of his first mourning session and feels another swell of gratitude. Truly, there was little that could replace family -- he does not think he would have survived past Erina and Danny, much less the alleged death of the Viscount, had his older cousin not been around.

Between Cross and Donagan (both of whom were still a hair taller than Jonathan), the other boys keep from pestering Jonathan. Directly, at least. But then the patriarch of the family dies -- Cross and Donagan's grandfather -- and they take a month-long leave of absence to attend the old man's funeral. Webb and Wilcox, while clever and vicious, are unfortunately insufficient to keep the mob at bay.

And so it is that Jonathan is accosted by another group of boys while lighting candles in the cathedral.

To hear footsteps is nothing unusual, but when he feels a hand on his shoulder, he squeaks, jumps, and drops the matchset in surprise.

"Well what do we have here?" the ringleader of the group asks. And then, answering his own
question, continues with, "If it isn't Mister Joestar, son of that traitor!" Lawrence Roland, eldest son of the Roland family, smirks. Jonathan regards the group of boys warily. The urge to fight, to defend his father's name against the slur of traitor, is strong. He picks up the set of the matches, returning them to their case, before turning to intruders.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

The boys snigger.

"Is there something I can help you with?" one of the fourth years mimics in a falsetto.

"Yes Joestar, now that you mention it -- " Roland claps his hands, "There is something you can help us with."

With an inexplicable amount of patience, Jonathan listens to the other boy rant and rave about how he was meant to have the spotlight, how he would be the next Lancaster Head were it not for Cross, and how, as he couldn't get to Cross directly, Jonathan is the obvious target. And so begins a laundry list of real and imagined slights, how though the lecturers praised him and the dean regularly corresponded with his parents, he was unable to even receive the position of Shoulder because of that wretched good for nothing Cross.

"And then there's you," Roland spits, tilting his chin to look down on Jonathan. "You countryside scum, waltzing in halfway through fourth year and becoming a goddamn celebrity. Where's your fame and fortune now Joestar? Where's the prestige your cousin and father earned?"

"Is that all?" Jonathan asks, voice oddly calm.

And then the other boy calls his father a coward, a traitor, a disserter, and it is as if time stops.

"Say that again, I dare you," he challenges, balling his hands into fists.

"Oh -- hoh!" one of the younger boys exclaim.

"It looks like he wants to fight!"

"Just like his old man, eh?"

"He'll probably run away halfway -- "

Roland doesn't get to finish his taunt for Jonathan slugs him in the face. He uses far more force than necessary to shut the other boy up and it is most ungentlemanly -- this much, Jonathan can admit. But he's spent two months putting up with his father being slandered left and right, to be able to hit one of his critics is immensely satisfying. The other boy puts up a weak block while his underlings spring forth to help but even with their numbers, they get in a scratch and nothing more.

Jonathan, after all, had spent his youth fighting with farmhands and Dio.

Emotion in excess, he remembers, when he's wiping the blood from his knuckles, is an extremely dangerous thing. The other boys have long since run away, with Roland hollering that he would sooner die than let this injustice go unpunished.

When he relays the story to Webb and Wilcox, they whoop and clap their hands, congratulating him on telling "that pigheaded menace" what's-what. And Jonathan relaxes, sharing supper with the two of them. When he sees Roland and his friends again, he'll make sure to apologize and explain himself properly. He had acted in error, a single punch was acceptable -- half a dozen was not. But
Roland is nowhere to be found.

Three days later, Jonathan is called to the dean's office.

Roland is seated already. Despite the still-purple bruise, his face is twisted with glee.

The dean tells Jonathan that he is most disappointed with his behavior. It was one thing to brawl, but to sneak up upon others while in prayer? He had considered recommending Jonathan for the position of Shoulder, but it is apparent that that would be too much responsibility for him.

Jonathan sits, stock-still, unable to defend himself from the half-dozen false accusations.

Because Roland is the son of an Earl and Jonathan is the son of a Viscount -- and a defamed one at that -- the punishment will be in-accordance with their difference in rank.

In a daze, he listens as the dean prescribes fifteen lashes, three for each boy. Roland's lower lip trembles, clearly he had expected more, but the dean reminds him that the difference in their ranks was not so great.

Chichester does have a room for corporal punishment. The man who doles it out is even dressed in executioner's garb. Through the fully-hooded face, Jonathan is told to pick between buttocks and back. He picks his back and takes off his blazer and shirt. The master of whipping allows him to fold both garments before instructing him to put his hands on the wall.

Were he not the son of a Viscount, the man would have made him count.

As it is, a cup of cold water is splashed on his face when he passes out on the ninth stroke.

When it is over and he cannot feel anything -- cannot think straight, even -- the nurse waiting outside rushes in, helping him onto a stretcher and wheeling him to the infirmary.

The next time he wakes, he is lying on his stomach in a sickbed. He groans, trying to move, and a hand reaches out, stilling him.

With effort, Jonathan cranes his head upwards and sees the familiar face of his older cousin. His expression, however, is an alien one. He will not forget it, the blazing enmity in his cousin's eyes.

For a while, Dio only looks at him.

Jonathan heaves a sigh, setting his head down.

"You look pretty scary, you know?" he laughs, trying to lighten the mood. "Be at ease, it's a normal enough punishment. Besides, now I know what Wilcox went through!" And then, when Dio maintains his silence, he adds, "I was in the wrong, after all."

After a while, Jonathan raises his head again.

"Dio...?" he asks, voice faltering under the weight of the other boy's gaze.

For a second, Dio's gaze softens. Then he turns his heel and leaves without a word.

Jonathan knows his older cousin well. Better than most people, at least. So though his muscles ache (to say nothing of his back), he exhales a second time, gathering forth all his energy to push himself up and off the bed.
Although his ire imbibes him with a sense of urgency, Dio refuses to be rushed. He maintains a measured gait, casually looking this way and that, before turning away from the York residence and continuing towards the Lancaster one. After double-checking that no witnesses were present, he flicks out his pocketknife, expertly picking the newly-installed lock. It gives way in minutes and he slips through the servants' entrance.

It is not the first time he's used this entrance.

Unlike with the York residence, the Lancaster boys live on the second floor. Their rooms are still marked with surnames however, which expedites Dio's search significantly. Halfway through the left wing, he sees the label "Cross | Joestar". He ignores said plaque, continuing onto the right wing. Three doors away from the end is the shared room of Misters Beige and Roland. As it is the summer term, both occupants are indeed in the room when Dio picks the second door's lock.

"Brando!" Roland exclaims, tumbling off the bed, "What are you doing here?! You're not supposed to be here, I -- "

Dio silences him with a look, turning instead to the other boy.

"You," he addresses, jabbing a thumb at the door, "Close the door on your way out."

Thomas Beige looks hesitantly between roommate and intruder before scurrying off. He obediently closes the door behind him and Dio goes to lock it, turning around to face the remaining Lancaster boy.

"What are you doing here?" Roland demands, "Do you have any idea how much trouble you'll be in if they find you?"

Before the other boy, he experiences a similar loss of language as he had before his cousin. Surreptitiously, he slips the already-folded edge back into his pocket, seating himself in the armchair. Roland presses his lips together, but thinks better of pressing the matter, instead following Dio's lead. Beige had been having afternoon tea before being dismissed; the table is subsequently still set. Dio takes out his handkerchief, wiping the rim of the cup, before pouring some more from the kettle.

Roland fidgets, eyes darting this way and that.

"I told you," Dio begins, after taking a tentative sip, "To scare him."

"I'd say he was scared plenty," Roland insists.

When Dio blinks, he sees the vicious red welts on Jonathan's backside.

He sets the teacup down and takes a breath.

"Your actions were in excess."

Roland gets over his anxiousness rather quickly then, laughing piteously.

"Come off your high horse Brando," the other boy sneers, "You're just jealous, aren't you? You wanted to whip him yourself." He shrugs, giving a devil-be-damned smirk, and adds, "You told me
to do something and I did it. Now are you going to make me Shoulder or not?"

With his lungs seized by rage, Dio cannot speak.

"I have to say though," Roland continues, "I didn't expect him to sit there and just take it. Figured he'd at least give his own story. I mean, my father outranks his so the dean would have to listen to my side of things but..." he snickers, looking pleased with himself in entirety, "He actually whipped him! Who'd have thought!" He slaps his knee, reaching forward to swipe a biscuit, "I haven't seen him of course, but do you think he'll scar? Gosh, I wonder what he'll tell his wife -- assuming he can even get one!"

Dio upends the tea kettle over Roland's lap. It's only a quarter-full, if that, but the water is still hot enough to scald.

Roland shrieks, flailing wildly and falling back on the floor. His limbs are shaking as he scrabbles uselessly.

By the time Dio finishes his tea, the other boy is halfway out of his trousers, buttocks bared for all to see. Dio sneers, getting up and going over to Roland's head. He crouches down and grabs a handful of hair, twisting with every intent to hurt.

"What the fuck -- " Roland roars, "What the fuck!"

"Scum like you should know your place."

"Who are you calling scum?!" Roland struggles, managing to get his lower garments about his knees, "You bastard, let me go!"

Dio ignores him, but Roland is far from finished.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" the other boy demands, "You were the one who offered me the favor! Didn't you say you hated him?!"

"Of course I do," Dio snaps, voice cracking with irritation, "But more than incompetence, I hate imperfection. For what good is a lame dog?"

"So get another one!"

In a coordinated motion, Dio lets go, stands up, and punts the prostrated boy in the stomach.

There's a gasp of air before Dio descends. Had he intended to kill the other? He honestly doesn't know. He had certainly been planning to draw blood. Roland parries as well as the pampered heir of an Earl would: blocking nothing while screaming hoarsely with each direct hit. His hands are uselessly clutched about his face, the one spot Dio abstains from hitting, and Dio would have beaten him unconscious, of that much he is certain, had they not been interrupted by a knocking on the door.

Dio freezes mid-punch; Roland freezes mid-scream.

With the desperation of a dying man, Roland opens his mouth to scream anew. He is fast, but Dio is faster, smashing his hand against the other boy's mouth and pulling out his pocketknife.

The knocking persists, followed by a familiar voice.

"Roland?" Jonathan asks, "Roland, are you there?"
Despite his prior abstaining, Dio's nails dig deep into Roland's cheek. He opens his knife and sets the blade right above the boy's nose, angled so that Roland could see the whole thing. His eyes, understandably, are as wide as saucers.

Dio removes his hand from Roland's mouth.

"Say one wrong word," he whispers in warning.

"What do you want?" Roland hollers.

"Get rid of him as fast as possible," Dio commands, right as Jonathan shakily replies --

"Are -- are you alright? Have you seen Dio?"

At the mention of his name, Dio tenses.

"Bugger off!"

On the other side of the door, Jonathan hesitates. He tries the doorknob, only to find it locked. Dio's mind races, eyes darting to the window. He is saved then, by Webb and Wilcox arriving on the scene.

"Joestar!" Webb shouts.

"Where in damnation have you been?!" Wilcox demands.

There's the sound of a futile struggle as Jonathan is inevitably pushed back to the infirmary by the chastising pair of jokers.

Dio's first mistake -- well, second, if the whole plot to have Jonathan crawl back to him could be considered the first -- is in relaxing. For he is too close to Roland, who, despite his bullishness, is far from stupid.

With his pants about his ankles and now-lukewarm water dripping from his crotch, not to mention being bruised black-and-blue until next Thursday, the other boy has the gall to laugh at Dio.

"Give me a break," Roland howls, falling back onto the floor with laughter, "I thought you were different, but you're just like Donagan!"

Dio stands up and kicks him again, this time in the chest.

But even with the air knocked out of him, Roland will not stop babbling.

"You're an incestuous homosexual!" he cackles, likely delirious from the pain, "And a fucking coward at that!"

"Watch your mouth Roland," Dio barks. The other boy only laughs harder.

"How pathetic! At least Lord Donagan doesn't need to bribe people to get his cousin whipped!" If Dio kicks any harder, he'll break bones. There's a nasty enough bruise blossoming, blossoming still at the base of his ribcage. Although nearly two years have passed since Prothmore's death, Dio is loathe to sully his hands a second time. Plus, this time, Roland had a witness in Beige and Jonathan suspected him of something. He takes a deep breath before sitting down in the armchair, munching on the last biscuit while contemplating the other boy's fate.

He cannot kill him, unfortunately. And though it would be satisfying to break some bones -- throw
him out of the window, even -- he will not be reduced to an animal.

By the time the maid arrives -- yet another damning witness to his presence in the Lancaster residence -- with gauze and salve, Roland has lifted himself up, wiped himself dry, and put on a clean pair of trousers.

Dio refuses to touch him, that he needs to oversee the aftercare is sickening enough.

As he's turning the doorknob, Roland stops him momentarily.

"In return for my silence," the other boy silkily begins, "I'll take the seat of Shoulder, with your will."

Dio slams the door shut, slipping back out the servant's quarters.

A week later, when Jonathan is about to be discharged from the infirmary, Dio pays his cousin a visit. Jonathan, of course, asks Dio where he went after the first visit; Dio shrugs before replying that he went back to his own room to study. Jonathan relaxes, eager as usual to believe the best of others, and even apologizes for doubting him. Dio laughs and pinches his nose. Then he asks Jonathan to take off his shirt and lie on his stomach.

How fully their roles had come to reverse, Dio contemplates, watching his cousin's embarrassment with mild amusement. He still remembers their earliest encounters, when Jonathan had gracelessly shown off everything to the other, rationalizing that they were cousins, and both boys at that.

With some chiding and a light hand, he manages to coax Jonathan onto his stomach. His cousin holds tight to his undershirt however, so Dio is forced to peel the lower portion off.

Not for the first time, Dio is struck with how quickly Jonathan's body healed itself. Already, the worst of the welts have smoothed over, leaving only a lingering rawness to the skin. Perhaps the master of whipping had had instructions to be lenient? It was possible that a softer whip was used on the sons of nobles. Either way, it is evident that there will be no scars. Dio breathes a sigh of relief, pulling the other boy's shirt back down.

Jonathan sits up on the bed and, seeing Dio's expression, laughs.

"Don't look like that," his mortally imbecilic cousin chides, "After all, it's not your fault I'm always getting into trouble."

The start of August marks the return of Cross and Donagan, who come back from the Isle of Wight with nothing but stories of the Princess Beatrice's wedding. How the Queen had lent her wedding veil, how grand the groom's mustache was, how the people had cried -- for the Queen's youngest had been off-limits for so many years! Surprisingly, Webb and Cross have strong opinions of their future weddings. Nevermind that Cross had gone through three fiancées and Webb had yet to find one, they have everything set in stone from the music to the food to flowers. Their enthusiasm makes Jonathan a little teary-eyed and when Wilcox questions the onset, he resolutely replies that he shall never marry -- that the only girl he's loved has taken his heart with her to the grave.

There is an outpouring of affectionate teasing then, towards the youngest (but now tallest) of their group. Cross calls him Mister Romantic, Webb calls him Casanova, even Donagan looks upon him with some admiration.

It has been three years since the Pendleton girl's death.

Dio is immensely pleased then -- that his efforts in engraving the girl on Jonathan's heart continued
Later, as the boys are leaving the meeting spot, Dio takes Cross aside. He tells the older boy about Jonathan's skirmish with Roland and, after reassuring the other that he, Dio, had taken care of things, asks him to keep a firm watch on Jonathan.

In the moonlight, he cannot make out Cross' gaze. But the other boy's reply breaks halfway and he turns abruptly, running back to the redgrounds.

Foolishly, Dio thinks that the other is merely going to belatedly console his cousin.

Leslie Cross proves himself to be Donagan's cousin though and through -- not to mention a shipwreck survivor -- in being a man of action. He manages to extract the whole story from Jonathan's lips -- something Dio had not considered necessary -- and storms into the dean's office the next day. Roland is called back and, with the crumbling of his story, confesses to having snuck up on Jonathan with four other boys in the Cathedral.

He is summarily punished (though not with whipping; he is still the son of an Earl, after all) and Jonathan is given a formal letter of apology (though it appends that the Joestar heir still acted in excess by brawling in the Cathedral, even if it was no fault of his).

Come another Michaelmas and the start of the sixth and final year, Dio is pleased to see that his examination results, coupled with 'excellent sportsmanship and unrivalled leadership qualities', have led to his nomination to the seat of Head of the York Class. His Shoulder is the second son of Duke Kensington. His plans for the sixth year are put in disarray however, as Cross' intervention had meant Jonathan being placed back on the list of candidates in Lancaster. He is made Shoulder of his class, with Cross as the Head.

Further underscoring his irritation towards Jonathan's mentor is how Donagan is allowed to be his pet -- gladly goes over, even!

I was the one who changed the rules, Dio is tempted to say. Before I was made Shoulder, interactions between classes would have been condemned.

The Viscount congratulates them heartily on both their new appointments, writing in addition that the family had successfully gotten a candidate to the highest seat of the newly-made Indian National Congress and would likely see a share of the administrative duties. He is working hard to bring their name back up, he adds, apologizing yet again for the current state of things. 'Inconveniences', the other man had dubbed them as!

The only inconvenience, Dio bitterly thinks, is that the Viscount had not died on the expedition.

It is only when he is lounging alone in an even grander room that he can admit to missing those fleeting in-between months when Jonathan had been entirely dependent on him. More than feeling thrilled or satisfied, his cousin's reliance had managed to soothe him. This was how things should be.

After their initial hemming and hawing, it is Jonathan, more than anyone, who has faith in him. And it is Jonathan who can make him breathless on words alone, choking on air so much that it hurt even to swallow. But Dio does not want to be given anything, least of all his cousin's inheritance.

Patience, he reminds himself. The goal is almost in-sight; he is more than halfway.

The first term flies by in a blur, the difference in responsibility between Shoulder and Head is
daunting. Once, he capitulates and needs to ask his Shoulder for help. Then he finds that Kensington has already ingratiated himself with Jonathan and Cross and the three of them have been chipping away in an assembly line of paperwork for three weeks. Then Jonathan is dragging him over and placing a lit candle and a seal in his hand: he is to stamp the letters thanking parents and patrons for another successful year.

The two of them return to the Joestar manor for Christmas. Although it had been the Viscount's turn to host the Boxing Day Gala this year, Dio discovers that the nobility have been split decisively on the issue of the Egyptian Problem. As it is, there seemed to be three factions: one which believed the intervention had been necessary, one which believed it had not, and a third group which felt that further intervention was necessary still.

On one thing they can agree upon: the Nile Expedition had been an embarrassing failure.

General Wolseley and his family are the only ones to come, travelling all the way from London to pay their respects. Jonathan is antsy at the thought of so much wasted food, but Mr. Joestar is the truly afflicted.

It is satisfying, truly satisfying, to see the nobility holding each other accountable.

Fate does not allow him to be satisfied for long. As he soon learns, the Joestars' fall from grace is much like an earthquake: tremors are felt in the vicinity for months and years afterwards.

But before that, the two of them return to Chichester and organize, with approval from the dean and financial support from the parents, a leavers-only trip.

Though it's a week-long affair, and they're only going to Dover at that, there is an immense amount of planning to be done, moving some thirty-odd seventeen-and-eighteen-year-olds to the eastern coastline and back. Ten carriages are called for, eight for the students and two for the supervisors - - though eight teachers are coming along (most of them athletic instructors of some kind), the Heads and Shoulders are given absolute authority -- and they buy out a whole inn and plan five back-to-back days of activities.

As they are outside of Chichester, the dean has agreed to loosen the restrictions between classes for the duration of the trip. Donagan and Cross, along with Webb and Wilcox, who had been rooming together previously, are unaffected by the change. Dio shamelessly pulls rank to be in the same room as Jonathan, across the hall from the other boys so his cousin will keep from complaining, and really, that is all that matters.
Always look ahead (The future is bright)

It is on the leavers-only trip that Dio falls in love.

Of course, if that meddling bastard Roland were to be believed, he had always been in love, but it is a possibility Dio refuses to acknowledge. The time is the final day of their leavers-only excursion; the setting is the oceanfront forest's edge of Dover. Fifteen pupils had been sent back prematurely - the idiots had been trying to smuggle opium and girls into the inn rooms -- leaving a little over thirty boys. Between fishing, hunting, hawking, swimming (though the snow had long since melted, the waters were still freezing), and rowing, there is a general sense of exhaustion on the last day. The Heads and Shoulders of the two classes decide, in lieu of the previously-planned marathon, to take a walking tour along the coastline.

Boys being boys, this activity quickly devolves into horseplay along the cliffs.

After having forced himself to keep at Jonathan's pace for a week, Dio is in dire need of some alone time. His cousin was quite acceptable -- likable, even -- when he was caught in the throes of grief. Even at school then, with the fear of exams and the Viscount's reproach weighing against him, Jonathan is bearable most times. But in his natural state? Running across the dunes like some wolf-child or climbing the trees like an ape?

It hurts him to look at Jonathan: with his sparkling dark locks and mirthfully-closed eyes and trademark toothy grin. He's in the middle of a cat-and-mouse game orchestrated by Webb and Wilcox, who have been joined by four other boys. Cross and Donagan are racing one another along the pebbled shores.

He swerves his gaze then, intending to look upon anything else. His eyes end up resting on the ruins of a Roman settlement. It is a dilapidated building, practically one with the cliffs and forests, and he has little interest in the past. But then he sees a bright a yellow ball being thrown from one end of the roof to the next, followed by a familiar uniform.

Cross and Jonathan are occupied and Kensington is nowhere to be found.

Clearly, literacy did not preclude stupidity.

Dio scowls, wondering what it was about 'WARNING: DANGER' signs that attracted adolescents, before stepping over the same sign and making his way up the tower.

He didn't think it possible, but the interior is in even worse condition. The stairs, while built into and around the wall, seem to be hanging by a thread. In spots, they have been eroded away altogether. And then there's the roof, or rather, the open space where a roof should have been.

"Is it too much to ask for you to read?" Dio drawls, stepping into the sunlight.

The boys on the upper landing freeze.

Apparently, playing catch had not been the primary pursuit.

Roland, denounced, demoted, and defamed, takes a final puff of the pipe before standing up. His eyes are bloodred.

"Brando," he slurs, "What a surprise to see you here."
Dio wrinkles his nose.

"I'm confiscating these articles," he snaps, curtly snatching three pipes up. "Now you can either stay in the tower until the teachers come or you can get some ocean air to sober up."

"You're not the boss of us!" one of the other boys laughs.

"Yankee pigs should rot with their kind," a second one adds.

"Hail Lancaster!" Roland cries, picking up a clod of pebbles and throwing it at Dio.

Dio sidesteps, glaring.

"Hail Lancaster!" the other boys chorus. They lob their own clods as well. One of them hits Dio in the back. He takes advantage of his sober state, pinning the guilty party against the wall. He could take all of them, this much he is certain. Whether there would be survivors is another story.

"Ease up a little Brando," Roland smirks, sidling up and attempting to put his arm about Dio's shoulder. Dio steps back and makes a thoroughly offended noise when Roland instead gropes at his crotch. The other boys almost wet themselves in laughter, even as Dio is batting Roland's hand away and kicking him firmly in the chest.

"Boys," Roland chokes out, "I'd like to present Mister Brando to you, a bona-fide --"

Dio kicks him again.

"Say it," he spits, eyes blazing, "Go on, say it."

The other boys murmur, trading glances and whispers. Dio pays them no heed, intent on shutting Roland up once and for all. He can dispose of the body in the woods and he is sure the the spineless flies buzzing about the Earl's son would quickly scatter with his death.

His mistake lies in forgetting how even the notoriously unpopular Donagan had a fierce supporter in Cross. And so too does this trashtalking foolhardy son of an Earl.

Right as he's lifting his leg to kick Roland in the stomach a second time, one of the other boys surges forward with a roar, buffeting his friend's assaulter with his shoulder. Dio is caught off-balance and knocked to the floor.

"Haven't you done enough?!" Roland's friend demands.

Dio only sneers.

Jonathan, he later discovers, had taken on this five-man group and fought them to a resounding defeat. It is humiliating then, that he needs his knife in order to parry them to a draw. At some point, he gets too cocky, slashing another boy's arm. There's a spurt of bright red and Dio is mesmerized for a second.

A second is too long; he finds himself shoved over the edge of the tower.

Falling head-first with his back to the building, time seems to ooze forward. This is a wretched way to die, he thinks.

"Oh shit! Oh fuck, fuck, fuck -- !" the boy who had pushed him over screams.

His vision moves from far to near. He sees the horizon, where the sea meets the sky, and then the
shoreline, and finally the outcropping of cliff and forest.

But most importantly, he sees Jonathan.

In those stand-still seconds, his younger cousin seems superhuman -- screaming Dio's name at the top of his lungs and sprinting across the dunes. It's not even that far of a fall, Dio thinks, because really, it isn't. Five, maybe six meters at most? But in that moment, Jonathan sees nothing but him. He catches Dio with outstretched arms and momentum sends them careening into the tower. Jonathan is left with a bloodied forehead; Dio gets bruises on his back.

How did they hit the ground? Had Jonathan collapsed from exhaustion? Dio does not know -- the moment ends and time resumes and by the time his brain has caught up to his body, Jonathan is wrapped about his shoulders and they are both on their knees.

"I was so scared -- " Jonathan gasps, "I was so, so, so scared!"

The other boys come running and the one who had pushed him off the tower scrambles down and everything is a mess. Donagan runs to call the teachers and upon their arrival, they return both classes to the inn. The village doctor is rung for and, after bandaging all three boys up, deems them fit to return.

The ache which he had wandered off to soothe has resolved itself in the meantime. The implications make him shudder, a thick and heady weight clasped about his innards. For the longest time, he has refrained from entertaining... no, from even considering the possibility. The facts remain as they are, however. Knowing that Jonathan, if only for a moment, had been filled with him, and only him, had single-handedly sent him over the edge.

More than wanting to feel it again, he wants to make Jonathan feel the same.

And in desiring reciprocation, is that not the essence of love?

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In that moment, Jonathan falls in love too. Not with Dio -- or with anyone, really -- but with an idea, a dream. When his head makes contact with the two thousand year old piece of rubble, he finds that, after confirming his cousin's safety, he can think of nothing else. That tower Dio had fallen off of had been a lighthouse, he discovers upon returning, and the lighthouse had been built by the Romans. To think that there were bricks and stones, shaped and touched and moved by people so many hundreds of years ago!

He digs through his wardrobe that night, pulling out his mother's heirloom. He had never noticed it before, but the stone mask has an inscription on the backside. By candlelight, he dedicatedly transcribes the signs, squinting at them in an attempt to make sense of the text. Knowing that this artefact had likely been made around the same time as a tower -- perhaps even before -- makes him shiver. He remembers the fight in their childhood, when he had been so angry and Dio had let him win. The mask had clattered to the floor then, and Jonathan distinctly remembers seeing spikes.

A whole hour passes as he tries to re-activate the mask. In between jostling and jiggling, he tries pressing certain spots, and even runs his fingers against the inscription. The mask does not respond however, and he ends up putting it back in his wardrobe before going to sleep.

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When Mr. Joestar asks the school for another leave of absence to celebrate Jonathan's eighteenth birthday, the dean says that the boys are allowed a day off on Easter Sunday but no more than that.
The boys, he explained, were Head and Shoulder this year, which meant that extended absences were unacceptable. The Viscount is disappointed -- Easter fell two weeks after his son's birthday after all -- but entirely understanding.

After church services on the day of, the Viscount arrives in a carriage, whisking his son and nephew to another gala.

It seemed that Mr. Joestar was at least in the process of rebuilding their place in society. Though the party is not hosted by an Earl or Duke, there are a handful nobles in attendance. It is a gala to celebrate recent archaeological excavations and Jonathan is beside himself with joy. Dio later learns that father and son had been in enthusiastic correspondence in the months following the Dover trip, and Mr. Joestar now whole-heartedly supported his son's new passion.

There is a reading from the Bible, comparing the flood of Genesis to a translated passage from He Who Saw the Deep.

Although the excavator of Kouyunjik had been living out his retirement in Venice for the better half of a decade, he is not above the occasional return to the land of his triumph. Sir Layard is less intimidating in his twilight years, great white beard and all, but his wife is still the talk of the town. It is as the papers say -- from Iraq to England, and everywhere in-between, her necklace of cylinder seals is even more eye-catching than her dress.

"What do you think they mean?" Jonathan whispers, looking pointedly at the seals.

"Why don't you ask?" Dio replies.

Jonathan shakes his head.

"Never! I'm sure Sir Layard has been asked dozens of times."

"Oh those trinkets are no good," one of the other guests interjects, "Look at those stoney things, there's not a jewel between the dozen of them!"

"Have you seen better?" Jonathan asks.

"Of course," the dame laughs, "I was in Berlin with the Schliemanns! Now that was a sight to behold!"

"The Schliemanns," yet another guest interrupts, "Are looters."

And so begins a heated debate on excavation morality and methodology which Jonathan eats right up. Dio is ambivalent about the treatments of some city from myth but then, such matters were the concern of the rich. He could do it, he considers. Take up an earning profession and fund Jonathan's dalliances. Perhaps his cousin would even dedicate some lost civilization to him.

As they need to leave early in order to arrive back in time, Jonathan never does work up the courage to talk to the old man. He chatters enthusiastically about the past and the future, about his mother's stone mask and his intentions to pursue his trite subject.

Though Jonathan had always expressed an interest in the past, Dio is hard-pressed to recall where the sudden enthusiasm for digging ditches stemmed from. But as it has little to do with the military and as he wants Jonathan to have nothing to do with the military, he considers it the lesser of two evils, smiling keenly and feigning interest on the carriage ride back.
The months fly by and soon enough, exams have come and gone. Dio finds himself relieved of his duties as Head, graduating still at the top of the class. The dean shakes everyone's hands, handing them a certificate to mark proof of competency and completion. Although most of the boys have their futures set out in some way or another, the sparse handful of students who plan to continue their studies huddle against one another, trembling with anticipation.

It is in the summer of 1886 that Dio discovers the aftershocks of the failed expedition. He had initially planned to enroll the two of them in Cambridge. He has already decided to go into law. But the admissions office as Cambridge turns out to be affiliated with the anti-interventionists. As a result, the university wants nothing to do with the sons of the Vicecommander of the Nile Expedition. Oxford is his fallback -- really, there were only two options -- and though it is sympathetic to the Joestars' stance, they refuse to admit Dio on the grounds of his "untitled paternal line". Jonathan, however, they gladly accept. His father was confirmed to be of good character.

While Dio is stewing, Wilcox is presented a magnificent gift for his twentieth birthday. It is imported from the continent and arrives on steamboat, pulled from the docks of Dover to the gates of Chichester by a team of eight horses.

"It's here, it's here!" Wilcox exclaims when he sees the horses pulling up.

"Good lord," Webb breathes, taking off his hat for emphasis, "It's enormous!"

"What is it?" Jonathan asks, while the coachman pries the nails from the lid.

"A Motorwagen!" Wilcox proudly declares. "My father said only a dozen have been imported so far!"

"For good reason," Donagan snorts, "That looks absolutely ridiculous."

"Three wheels?" Cross agrees, "For a thousand pounds, you'd think they could afford four."

"And where are the horses shackled?" Dio prods, "At the back?"

"Laugh all you want," Wilcox sniffs, "But when you see this beauty at work..." he hefts himself up into the front seat, digging out a key and trying to switch the motor on. His friends wait with baited breath. Minutes pass.

"I think he's missing a horse," Webb hisses.

"I think he's missing some money," Cross whispers back.

"Shut up you two," Wilcox snaps, whirling on the coachman, "You! Why is this not working? Was the advertisement not 'fully functional with no assembly required'?!

"Lord Wilcox, with all due respect," the coachman hides a smile behind his hand, "You have yet to add gasoline."

"Gasoline?" Donagan repeats.

"You might as well burn the crowns while you're at it," Webb advises. "At least then the leftovers can be pawned off!"

"Dio!" Jonathan calls out, "Dio, where are you going?"

"Back. This is a waste of time."
Jonathan will not be denied however. He runs after Dio, pulling on the older boy's sleeve.

"What is it?"

"I should be asking you that," his cousin retorts. "You've been on edge all month, what's the matter?"

'Your miserable father put me in the registry without bothering to change my surname so I am saddled with all of the burdens and none of the gains,' Dio cannot say.

"Nothing," he says instead, pulling his arm away. "I've just been busy with other things."

"Joestar! Brando!" Wilcox calls, "Get back here, you'll want to see this!"

Jonathan eagerly dashes back; Dio reluctantly follows. The spectacle Wilcox demonstrates takes everyone's breath away.

"Woah..."

"How is it moving?"

"Wilcox, can you steer it?"

"I wanna ride in it!"

"No, me!"

The five of them disregard Wilcox's advise of 'two at a time', giddily piling into the horseless carriage.

"Move over Donagan!" Wilcox whines, "Your knee is digging into my side!"

"Speak for yourself," Donagan shoots back, "And start it up already."

"With friends like you five..." Wilcox mutters. He starts the engine up again, and is pleasantly surprised to discover the Motorwagen chugging along, barely slowed down by their combined bulk.

"This is really nice, actually!" Cross admits once the six of them clear the gate.

"It is, isn't it?" Jonathan grins, "How'd you like it Dio?"

"It's alright," Dio shrugs.

"A bit slow, don't you think?" Webb asks, squinting at the passing fields. "Do you reckon we're outsped by horses?"

"I reckon we're outsped by turtles," Donagan drawls.

"I didn't think your cousin was such a Luddite," Wilcox laughs.

"Do you think this can go faster?" Jonathan presses.

Sufficiently spurred, Wilcox turns the crank, pressing down harder on the ignition pedal. Someone hollers 'now that's more like it!' before their collective voices are drowned out by the engine.

Their afternoon joyride ends abruptly two miles away from the school, with the engine running out
of fuel and the horseless carriage puttering to a halt. Once it becomes clear that no amount of praying, screaming, or kicking will get the cart moving again, the boys mercilessly tease Wilcox all the way back to Chichester.

"A toast," Webb proposes, as the six of them are gathered in the pink for one last party.

"We should be packing," Donagan sternly notes.

"No goodbyes, really?" Wilcox demands.

"It's a small enough world," Cross shrugs, "We'll see each other at functions certainly."

"And in Parliament!" Jonathan adds.

"As if you'd attend," Dio scoffs.

"A toast, a toast!" Webb repeats, tapping the table. "We've spent eight years together... ah, well, three with Brando and Joestar here."

"Three and a half," Cross corrects.

"Three and a half years," Jonathan nods. Though it's no one's birthday, a cake with candles has nonetheless been acquired. He lifts his glass then, proposing the first toast: "To happy times."

"Three and a half years," Webb echoes, "And you're still a goddamn sap. Alright, alright. To happy times it is!"

"And happier tomorrows?" Wilcox adds.

"Doesn't that sound too serious?" Cross asks, making a face. "We're not that old yet!"

"May Mister Cross find happiness in his fifth fiancée!" Webb snipes while winking.

"And may Mister Webb find one!" Cross shoots back.

"Nec cesso nec erro," Donagan recites.

"I'll drink," Dio murmurs, clinking their glasses, "To that."

_I will not stumble; I will not fall._

With a wistful solemnness, the other boys clink their glasses as well.

Jonathan is predictably tearful as the carriages are lining up the next day. Their carriage is one of the first to arrive.

"I won't forget you," he fervently promises, hugging his mentor tight.

"Am I dead in your mind already?" Cross chuckles, pinching his cheek. "Brando, keep above things! Let me know how it turns out and if you're ever in the Isle of Wight -- " his parting is cut short by another rendition of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' courtesy of Misters Webb and Wilcox, who had looped the whole orchestra along for the song.

"Good-bye!" Jonathan shouts, even after they're in the carriage and the doors are closed.

"Good-bye, good-bye!"
"Crying again Jojo?" Dio asks, exasperated as usual. Jonathan's lower lip trembles before his whole expression gives way. Dio rolls his eyes, reaching forward to dab at the tears.

Two weeks later, after they've settled back into the manor, Dio confronts Jonathan over the contents of a letter.

"Jojo," he growls, holding forth the offending document, "How long were you planning on hiding this? Does Father know?"

Jonathan gives a weak little cry, snatching the parchment back.

"A university in London, really?" Dio raises his eyebrow, "You were accepted into Oxford. Why not go there?"

"Oxford doesn't have archaeology."

"So go in history. What's the difference? You'll be studying the dead either way."

Jonathan shakes his head, "No," he says, "You wouldn't understand."

Dio could not care less about the nuances between the two fields; he's already deemed both equally inefficient in generating capital and thus, equally useless. No, what annoys him is having Jonathan, even unintentionally, take the lead. But it is a blessing, that much he can admit. He had had wild plots of keeping Jonathan from Oxford, none of which were feasible in the long run. He yanks the letter out of his cousin's grasp, scanning its contents a second time.

"Hugh Hudson Academy..." he repeats, folding the letter and handing it back. He has heard of it in passing, though he had never considered enrolling. It had only just been granted a royal charter for one, and it was located in the city-center of London for another.

Jonathan looks this way and that, unable to maintain eye contact.

"I know what you're going to say Dio," the other boy fidgets, "That it's a waste of time and money, that the chances of discovering something new are nonexistent. But after listening to the others, none of whom are looking forward to their work, I've decided I'm going to learn something I like. Father has said he'll support you on whatever you choose to do. I'll write to Oxford letting them know I can't make it, do you think they'd let you go in my stead?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Dio replies, "Why would I want to go there?"

"But then... what will you do?"

"Come now Jojo," Dio admonishes, "Did you think I would leave you to the streets of London?" He clucks his tongue, "A simpleton like you... you'd have your bones cleaned within the hour."

Now that they are almost men, open displays of affection are frowned upon.

Jonathan shows off his regard for propriety by tackling his cousin with a hug.

"Oh Dio!" he sighs, the very picture of relief, "I had wanted to ask you but -- but Father said I was overly reliant already! Are you sure you won't mind London? We can get a flat while we're there. Oh, but Father needs to write to the university... and what will you be studying?" He grins from cheek to cheek, taking Dio's hands and squeezing tight, "I'm so happy Dio, really. Thank you so
"You need not be," Dio replies, unable to keep the smile from his mouth, "For there is nowhere else I'd rather be."

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*An Approach of Carrot and Stick*
End of Part II: Adolescence (1883-1886)
Come bustle, my neighbors, give over your labours

When their carriage pulls into the newly-let property, it is well past midnight. The porter at the front of the lodge helps them carry their half-dozen pieces of luggage (three suitcases each) up the six flights of stairs to the two-bedroom en suite third floor flat. It is fully furnished, as per the Viscount's instructions, though the shelves are empty and the pantry and ice box are unstocked. Jonathan, having babbled nonstop throughout the ride, is exhausted. He throws himself onto the first bed he sees and is loudly snoring in minutes. Dio helps himself to the leftover room across the hall, changing into more suitable garments before slipping into bed.

So, he thinks. After less than a decade, he is once more a resident of the Great Wen.

This sprawling man-made mass which seems to eat its residents alive is different from what he remembers. How much of that perspective is altered by money, he does not know. The London of his memory was gritty, grimey, dark, and cold. Even in September, he remembers huddling about embers in the night. There had been no greenery or finery is the city of his childhood -- certainly no space for a communal garden at the front entrance of any home.

For a fleeting moment, he is struck with the desire to visit his old residence. The inn had been closed before his mother's death and the building might have been bought, but the tenements should still exist. It is a foolish notion though. He is long past those days. Now he is the officially adopted son, in writing if not in blood or name, of a Viscount and he will do anything to maintain this lifestyle. So he rolls over and shields his eyes.

With time, sleep comes.

"Good morning," Jonathan greets the next day, when Dio has finally deigned it necessary to wash and dress. He's seated in the kitchen parlor, halfway through another archaeological tome.

"Good morning," Dio replies. He pours himself a glass of water, then goes around inspecting the flat.

As with everything provided by Mr. Joestar, it must have cost a pretty penny: clean, spacious, and clearly recently refurbished. In addition to the two bedrooms, there is a washroom and a bathroom, a miniature entranceway, the kitchen parlor combination, and a study. There are two doors to the study: one leading to the hallway and the other to a cornerside balcony. Jonathan has already acquainted himself with the landlord and lady, old blood who had been settled in London for generations. They do not think much of the Joestars, he admits, but they do think the world of Wolseley.

With his inspection complete, Dio returns to the kitchen table. Then he looks at his cousin and frowns.

"Jojo."

"Hm?"

"Why are you still wearing that?"

"This?" Jonathan asks, mistakenly pointing to the Lancaster pin, "Ah, well, I've worn it for so long, it feels strange to go without."

"Not the pin," Dio sighs, "The uniform."
Jonathan looks him up and down, before looking back to himself.

"Oh," he starts, scratching his cheek, "I didn't think about it. You don't think there's a *rule* against wearing school uniforms at university, is there?"

"Jojo," Dio groans, wondering when his plans (and, for that matter, tastes) went awry, "You are not showing up to lectures in your Chichester uniform. I forbid it."

Jonathan makes a face, as if tempted to say something cheeky.

"I haven't any other outfits," he confesses, scratching at the back of his neck.

"You brought just as many suitcases as I did!"

"All books. Father said I could take whatever I pleased from the library at home."

"So you took everything?" Dio growls, "I don't believe this." He stomps off to the other room and rifles about Jonathan's things for a bit. Then he stomps back to the kitchen and crosses his arms in disbelief, "You packed a whole suitcase of *undergarments*?"

"I didn't know what else to pack," Jonathan mumbles, going back to his book.

Dio reaches forward, snatching the volume away, "Jojo, this is unacceptable. You've packed snacks and books and nothing useful -- do you plan to wear the same trousers all year?"

"It's not my fault," Jonathan whines, reaching for his book, "We've been at Chichester for so long, my old clothes don't fit me. And I was too busy reading to ask Father to call for a tailor."

Mercifully, Dio does not begin a diatribe on poor time management and even sorrier priorities. Instead, he closes the book and hands it back to his cousin. "Come with me," he says. Jonathan follows him back to his own room, where he roots through his own pieces of luggage. "Pick something from these," he instructs.

Jonathan makes a face. Actually, he makes a series of faces.

Dio glowers.

"What?" he spits.

"Dio..." Jonathan admits, averting his gaze, "I don't really share your sense of fashion."

'I have no sense of style and insist on wearing the same damn uniform,' Dio hears. Rather than take offense, because he admittedly didn't want Jonathan to stand out too much, he sighs again.

"Alright," he says, "A tailor, then."

"What?"

"Let's go see a tailor."

Like the spoiled child he is, Jonathan raises a fuss about going. However, when his primary defense is that archaeologists are meant to smell, even the landlady joins Dio's side. The carriage is rung for and Jonathan is pushed and prodded in. He crosses his arms and sulks the whole way through. Thankfully, Tuesday afternoons are not an especially busy time for Harrods. The man in charge of bespoke garments has had no customers for the day and is delighted that the Baron Joestar has deemed it necessary to purchase a new wardrobe.
"You should get something too," Jonathan suggests while he is forced to stand upright with arms outstretched and poked at with a dozen odd pins.

"Unlike you, I brought multiple sets of clothing."

"But don't you want something more normal?" His cousin presses.

"Normal how?" Dio scowls.

"Um, well, you know..." the tailor makes Jonathan lift his knee, "Something without feathers? Or sequins? Or maybe less colors? You're going to study law, after all."

"So you're saying I dress like a painter," Dio concludes.

"And there's nothing wrong with that!" Jonathan is quick to disclaim. "It's just not very lawyer-like, I think."

When Dio sighs, the tailor hears money.

"Fine," he tells the already-smiling man, "When you're done with this fool here, cut me one of your blandest suits."

"With pleasure!" the tailor chirrups.

If it were anyone other than Jonathan, he would have accused them of conspiracy. But because it is Jonathan, his hapless cousin who somehow thought he would survive in London for three years with only his schoolboy uniform, he is only mildly annoyed when, after his own fitting has finished and their totals have been rung up, the other boy is nowhere to be found.

The tailor graciously allows him to wait inside his shop. Dio opens the same book Jonathan had been reading over the table. Try as he may, his eyes keep glazing over and he is unable to concentrate for more than a couple paragraphs. He has no idea what Jonathan sees in the subject -- it's metric tonnes of dirt with bones and pottery fragments sprinkled about every hundred shovellings. It should all be used for agriculture, if he is to be asked.

Despite his stop-start reading and constant glancing at the door, he manages to get through half the volume before Jonathan sheepishly returns. His hands are unsurprisingly filled.

"What," Dio starts, slamming the covers shut and standing up, "Are those crates for?"

"Well..." Jonathan starts, blatantly looking for an escape.

His cousin had returned with crates. Two crates, to be precise. Two wooden crates filled to the brim with --

"Books?!" Dio nearly shrieks. He is inches away from clawing at his own hair. "Those two suitcases were insufficient and you needed to buy more?" He reaches into one and pulls out the uppermost publication. It's an 1880 German archaeological journal. "You can't even read German!"

"It doesn't mean I won't learn," Jonathan protests, "Dio, you have to go see yourself! I swear, I've never seen so many books on sale! There are twenty copies of all the Romantic philosophers! At least!"

"We've wasted enough money for one day. How much did those books cost? No, don't look at me like that, I want a number."
Jonathan is smart enough, at least, to look contrite when he reveals his remaining allowance.

"Three pence." Dio counts.


"You..." Dio refrains from choice language, forcing himself to take a deep breath. "You spent a month's allowance in one day and all you have to show for it are books?"

"I thought you liked books," Jonathan petulantly responds.

"I also like having food."

"Don't be silly," Jonathan laughs, "The servants will make us supper." And then, seeing Dio momentarily relax, he seizes the moment, adding slyly: "Oh, and Dio, before you write off the bookstore, did I mention there's a whole corner devoted to Italian works?"

With effort, Dio maintains his nonchalance.

"Oh?" he says, still righteously outraged, "You don't say."

"It's nothing much," Jonathan shrugs, gamely playing along. He shoulders both crates, continuing with, "But I did count five shelves."

Dio swallows.

"Five -- shelves?"

"Mm-hm," Jonathan hums, looking entirely too pleased.

It is definitely a weakness. He hates Chichester for having sorted him into the York class, hates the York class for having required him to learn a modern language, and hates dumb luck for making him pick Italian. Like a man possessed, he lets Jonathan lead him to the bookstore where there are indeed five bookshelves' worth of Italian tomes, all available for purchase. There are books he hasn't heard of, on subjects only the Mediterraneans would think of writing, and books which had always been too popular to keep for long.

Once again, it happens so fast he doesn't know what, exactly, took place. When he exits the department store, he is the reluctant new owner of twenty-seven Italian manuscripts, three of which were first editions.

"Cheer up," Jonathan remarks, helping Dio into the carriage. "You'll have time to read them! Maybe you can even read some to me!"

Dio stares at the proffered food. Roasted chestnuts in a scrap of newspaper.

"Where did you get that?" he asks.

"Outside," Jonathan shrugs, "It was three pence for a packet. Want some? They're quite good."

It is, Dio soon discovers, the worst way to spend their last scrap of money. When they return to the flat and cart their purchases up to the third floor, the landlady clears their misapprehensions: this is a let property, not a boarding house. There are no meals to be served. Dio very nearly throttles his cousin then.

Jonathan shrugs, with all the carelessness of someone who could count on one hand the number of
times he had gone without, and says with very honest bravado that they will survive.

"And pray tell," Dio drawls, "How are we to survive for a month without food?"

"I'm sure it'll all work out," Jonathan confidently says.

Dio swallows his pride and goes to beg the landlady for scraps. She is most obliging and gives him a fine cut of lamb and a pan, as well as a packet of spices.

"Can you even cook?" Jonathan asks, when Dio is rolling up his sleeves.

"No," Dio says. "Can you?"

"Not that I know of. I've never tried." He pauses, then adds, "D'you think you should save some of that meat?"

"Why?"

"Well... it seems to be a large portion."

"So we should cook it at once and dry the leftovers."

"Are you sure you'll get it right the first time?" Jonathan asks.

"Alright," Dio snaps, swinging the knife with more force than necessary, "I've chopped it in half, may I cook now?" Needless to say, this was not how he imagined settling into London.

"Good luck!" Jonathan cheers, popping the other half into the icebox and giving his cousin a wide berth.

In one hour, Dio manages to char the slice past recognition. The landlord comes knocking, asking if they were smoking inside the residence, which was strictly forbidden. Jonathan, of course, is snorting with laughter, even while opening the windows, and Dio needs to reply no, no they are not smoking, yes, the smoke is from some burnt meat, no, they do not need help.

"Let me try?" Jonathan offers, after he's wiped his eyes.

"I doubt you'll do better."

"You never know," his cousin shrugs, "Perhaps I have a hidden talent for housework!"

"By all means," Dio snorts, relinquishing his hold over knife and pan.

Jonathan pulls out his half cut of the lamb and proceeds to burn the meat even faster than Dio. He ends up chucking product and pan -- both neatly in flames -- out the open window.

"You idiot!" Dio screams, before he promptly dashes out the door and down the stairs to stomp out said fire.

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry...!" Jonathan wails, not for the first time.

They end up lounging in the parlor with empty stomachs.

"How did you spend all your allowance?" Jonathan ends up asking.

"On books and clothing."
"Oh! Did I make you pay the tailor? I'll pay you back next month, I promise."

Dio laughs, "Only you could think of debts on an empty stomach, Jojo."

"What else is there to think of?" Jonathan's stomach rumbles and he rubs it, wincing, "Hopefully some of our classmates will be going through the same thing."

"Jojo," Dio says, right as the other is about to retire. "This cannot go on. We won't make it past the week, much less a month."

Jonathan stops in his step, heaving his shoulders up and then down.

"So... you're saying I should write to Father?"

The prospect of begging the Viscount for help is unsavory to say the least.

"It's the most logical solution," Dio replies. And then, when Jonathan looks unconvinced, "I'm sure your father will understand. It's your first time living in London. Books and garments are both necessary purchases."

If anything, Dio rationalizes, it was the Viscount's fault for thinking they could survive the first month on thirty crowns.

"Why don't you write to him then?" Jonathan retorts. "No, don't just frown. Do you know how many letters he's sent to me asking about you? Or worrying about how you never ask him for help?"

"Because I don't need his help," Dio testily contends.

"But you want me to ask him to send us more money?"

"Because you spent it all on frivolous things!"

"So I'll starve for a month, no problem!"

"For someone like you?" Dio scoffs, "I wouldn't give you a week!"

"We'll see about that!"

Jonathan stomps off, resoundedly closing his door. Dio rubs at his forehead, wondering why he had thought the other would be any better at managing finances. It was clearly something the Viscount had wanted them to learn and, realistically, fifteen pounds was more than enough for a month -- even two, possibly. His own family of three had subsisted on little more than seven pounds per month, under a hundred pounds per annum! And they were not, he is quick to recall, the bottom of the barrel. They had a place of their own, a consistent roof over their heads.

His stomach rumbles then, clearly dissatisfied. He thinks he can go without for a week, tops. Water was freely provided and if the landlady continued to be so accommodating, perhaps they would learn how to cook before starvation set in.

The second morning in London snaps his resolve in half. He wakes before Jonathan, an unusual enough occurrence as it is, and after an hour of drinking water and flipping pages, he throws open the door of the other bedroom to find his cousin pathetically gnawing on the bedsheet.

"My head hurts," the positively spoiled brat complains, "And I swear there's a hole in my stomach."
"Don't be ridiculous," Dio hisses, pulling the blanket from his grasp and shoving a glass of water into his hands. "It's been less than two days. Stop being so stubborn and write to Father."

Jonathan drinks the water only to vehemently shake his head.

"No," he moans, curling onto himself, "If I'm to be an archaeologist, I must learn to live without."

How much of it was planned, Dio cannot say. Either way, Jonathan had severely overestimated his own capabilities -- if he was stupid enough to think he could go from three meals to none at the drop of a hat. He tries to get the other up, tries to take his mind off of the hunger, to no avail. It is difficult enough to be sympathetic; his own hunger (courtesy of the other) only adds to the burden.

For a spiteful moment, he considers letting the other boy starve.

What a picture that would be, an emaciated Jonathan Joestar woefully penning a desperate plea to his father, only for the letter to reach the Viscount one week too late.

It is a strange thing, he thinks again, to love and loathe with such intensity. He does not bid Jonathan farewell when he suits himself up, makes no declaration of departure when he exits the residence. The porter had asked if he needed a carriage; he had politely declined, citing an urge to walk, to explore the vicinity.

Realistically, he could have staved off the hunger pangs for another day, maybe two. Even now, away from his cousin, his head is remarkably clear. In the daylight and on foot, the city is more recognizable to him. Of course they live in a much nicer area, so nice that bits of the sky peek out through the smog, but the proliferation of people is still the same and as usual, there are nobles who insist on walking with the masses.

Tucked in an alleyway opposite the Saint Pancras station, he flexes his fingers and waits.

Sure enough, an easy victim comes into view. He has nothing in particular against rich old women - but they are the easiest to rob, and often paranoid enough to carry large amounts on their immediate person.

He makes a big act of being pushed by another passerby and, in the act of preventing the old woman's fall, nicks her wallet from her unlatched purse. While she is thanking him, the well-dressed, well-to-do gentleman, for so kindly helping her, and you don't say, the adopted son of Viscount Joestar?, he transfers the coinage to his own pocket, returning the wallet and kindly latching her purse.

After they trade details and he bids her on her merry way, Dio ducks back into the alleyway and counts his earnings.

Twenty pounds, fifteen shillings, and sixty-something pence. He probably could have snatched up the notes as well, thinking back. All in all, it is the perfect crime. Well, it would be, had there not been a witness.

As he's exiting the alleyway, he practically careens into an Oriental -- a man with dark eyes and hair only as tall as his shoulder. Dio smiles politely, tipping his hat in apology, but he does not miss the other's accusing glance. He thinks nothing of it; what were the chances that man would intervene? And how likely would the Grand Dame believe a foreigner's word over the his?

He returns to the Fitzroy Square flat twenty crowns richer and finds Jonathan still curled up in bed. Dio rouses his cousin, confessing that he had found some leftover money amidst his luggage and
would Jonathan be inclined for breakfast. And then he hollers Jonathan's ear off and drags him out of bed because of course the wretched child would insist on starving himself further.

"Order whatever you like," Dio sniffs, after they've washed and dressed and seated themselves at a nearby restaurant.

"I'm not hungry," Jonathan says, turning his head.

"We'll have two of the full English," he tells the waiter, handing their menus back.

"Don't think I'll eat it," his cousin insists.

It is a moment Dio commits to memory, how Jonathan's eyes widen at the sight of their plates, how his hands tremble while grasping for the utensils. Perpetually messy, he manages to get beans on his uniform collar even when eating slowly. It's a gradual decline, a loss of control, and it is a lovely thing to watch. How rapidly the other succumbs to his hunger, how he spears the sausage, doesn't bother cutting the toast, and eats the mash without a spoon. He inhales the plate in under ten minutes and when Dio offers his own untouched plate, Jonathan looks like a wild animal, pausing only to give thanks.

With pride, he notes that he, Dio, reduced Jonathan to this state.

He orders a third plate and actually eats it this time. In an indulgent mood, he trades his hash browns for mushrooms and tomatoes and watches Jonathan gobble down the fried biscuit.

The hearty meal costs four shillings and twelve pence.

Drowsy with contentment, Jonathan needs to lean against Dio on the way back. Dio is brought out of his thoughts of how Jonathan's tongue would feel against his fingers.

"What a different world we live in now!"

"How so?"

"That Motorwagen Wilcox's parents bought him was a thousand pounds. But you saved my life with four shillings."

"You exaggerate," Dio deflects, even as he revels in praise.

"It is not a bad world," Jonathan declares, "I think I will like it."

Of course, Dio's heroics are made for naught when the Viscount's carriage is seen waiting outside their residence. The Viscount cuffs and hugs them in rapid succession, apologizing for not having sent them off properly. Jonathan confesses to having spent his money on books and clothing and adds that he had cut into Dio's savings as well, and Mr. Joestar pardons him without hesitation, giving the two of them two month's worth of spending money, to be used at their discretion. He adds that, while learning how to cook would be ideal, the cafeteria at the university was quite affordable for those who could not.

Before departing, the Viscount takes son and nephew out to dine at the Grosvenor, overlooking Buckingham. The steak is cooked so well, and the wine so sweet, Jonathan nearly cries. He reminds them that orientation will be in two days with lectures starting on Monday. Hugh Hudson, for reasons attributed to its heathenous founders, adamantly refused to use the tried and true calendar dates -- their courses tended to start a week before or after Michaelmas.
Then he bids them farewell while wishing them good-luck, and Jonathan remarks on how lucky they are -- to have such a wonderful father.
The moderate weather departs with the Viscount.

The day after, when the two of them have suited up to buy groceries and supplies, Jonathan takes one step out before doubling back. In the southern countryside, late September had meant little more than the odd blustery day. Here in London however, it means hats, scarves, gloves, and umbrellas. They go out a second time with little fuss, and Jonathan refrains from stomping in the puddles. The landlady has directed them to a butcher/grocer combination and Dio, having decided to try his hand again at cooking, buys three baskets worth of ingredients. Jonathan displays his more sensible side, discreetly placing an elementary cookbook amongst their purchases.

They cart the raw materials up the six flights, sorting the items into the icebox and pantry respectively. Dio declares that the rest of the day should be spent tidying the flat up and Jonathan readily agrees. For Dio, this means taking his two dozen blazer and trouser combinations out of the trunks and placing them in the wardrobe. For Jonathan, this means cramming his season's supply of pants into the uppermost drawer and then alphabetizing his library.

It is no surprise then, that when Dio calls for his empty luggage to be stored away, Jonathan is only halfway done.

"Hurry it up, will you?" Dio prompts.

"What's the rush?" Jonathan asks. He doesn't even bother looking up.

"It's already half past five. Making the porter come up and down after supper is impolite."

"Ah, good point." He tries to organize a bit faster, but throws up his hands, "Oh, forget about it. I'll store my cases away tomorrow."

"Orientation is tomorrow."

"Oh. Right." He winces, "You know, the first thing I'm buying once we're back at Harrods is a diary. I have no idea how you remember all this."

"If your head weren't filled with frivolous things..." Dio warns.

"Yes, yes," Jonathan returns to his indexing. "Bandelier... Bustamante... Catherwood... ah, another one by Aglio."

Dio sighs, recognizing a lost cause on-sight. "Supper will be ready in an hour," he says.

"We're not eating out?"

"We just bought enough meat and vegetables for a week!"

"Just because you bought a cookbook doesn't mean you know how to cook."

Dio refuses comment, intent on proving his cousin wrong. So what if his mother had cooked for him throughout childhood? Or that he had subsisted off of stolen morsels following her death? He had come from a different background -- to simply sit back and say "cooking is unnecessary" was absurd. It is one of the few points he can agree with the Viscount on, actually: that self-sufficiency was extremely important in the grander scheme of things.
When Jonathan pops into the kitchen half an hour later, he sees his older cousin scowling at another burned piece of lamb.

"Cooking is unnecessary," Dio spits, "Your father has given us enough money to eat out every night."

Rather than 'I told you so', Jonathan goes over to examine the meat. Then he opens the cookbook and flips to the relevant section. "Where did you go wrong?" he asks.

"Everywhere. Nowhere. I have no idea." Dio wrings his hands, "I refuse to believe such instructions are simple. Couldn't you have picked a better manual?"

"This was the only one they had," Jonathan shrugs. "I think it's acceptable. We have a modern kitchenplace and we are a private family."

"It's a publication aimed at women," Dio peevishly retorts.

"Well, that's true. Perhaps we could ask the Countess Fitzroy for tips?" His stomach rumbles and he looks at the clock. "I could try again later. Tomorrow afternoon perhaps? Let's eat at a restaurant tonight; Father warned against going to orientation on an empty stomach."

And so they amble out again only to dash back because sure enough, London being London, it was still raining. They walk to the nearest pub huddled under umbrellas where they order steak and chicken respectively. The food in the city is different too, Jonathan remarks between bites. There's a lot more spices and the cooks aren't so stingey with oil.

They're hiding the age of the meat, Dio resists saying. He would know, after all.

After supper, they walk back to the flat. Jonathan ropes Dio into organizing the rest of his books -- because you're so much better at it than me, he shamelessly trills -- and when the two crates and two cases are emptied out, it becomes clear that Jonathan needs an additional shelf for his collection. For the moment, Dio allows the other to put the spilled-over books on the shelf in his room. Jonathan protests, asking where Dio's thirty manuscripts would go.

"First," Dio grates, "It's twenty-seven not thirty, and second, they're already placed on the top shelf."

"Oh, alright," Jonathan relents.

In all fairness, the books that will not fit on his shelves only take up a shelf and a half of Dio's space. Unfortunately, they are also the beginner basics -- and the ones written in English at that. He will regret this later, he knows.

"I'll ask the Countess to call for the porter tomorrow," he adds, slotting the final book in place.

"Now what?" he prompts, straightening up and wiping the dust from his hands.

"It's almost ten, we should be off to bed."

"Really?" Jonathan raises an eyebrow. "Are you tired already?"

"This isn't a matter of being tired or not," Dio snaps. Then he catches the look in Jonathan's eye and grinds his teeth. "What are you thinking of now?"

"Why not read some of your Italian stuff?" his cousin suggests.
"Aloud, you mean?" Dio dryly guesses.

Jonathan only grins, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Fine," Dio sighs, relenting like always. He takes one of the thicker volumes, a Boccaccio piece he has only heard of from Shakespeare. "But don't expect me to translate."

"Yes, yes," Jonathan laughs, leading the way to the parlor. He flops onto the sofa, leaving Dio the armchair, and rolls over, heaving his neck over the armrest. Jonathan is a much better reader than listener -- of this, Dio is certain. Despite his promise to not demand translations -- his working knowledge of Latin should have sufficed plenty for Italian -- he petulantly asks 'what did that mean?' every other page. And when Dio breaks narration to explain, because what good was reading aloud if the other person couldn't understand?, Jonathan furrows his eyebrows, insisting 'are you sure that's what they meant?'

It takes them an hour to get to Criseida's introduction. By that point, even Dio is uncertain who the focal character is. It is obvious, at least, that Criseida is an overlay of the poet's own love. Whether he has written himself into the shoes of the first or second lover -- therein lies the question.

"Have you read the play at least?"

"What play?" Jonathan answers. He rubs the sleep from his eyes.

"The one by Shakespeare. *Troilus and Cressida.*"

"No," he shakes his head, closing his eyes, "Is it a tragedy?"

"Yes."

"Is this a tragedy?"

"Yes."

"I don't like them." And then, before Dio can argue (or berate him for having such wretched tastes), he continues with, "But you must have read them, right? In the York class? We had to read the older plays... Euripides and Aeschylus and so-such." He makes a face, "Everyone dies in them, you know? There's never any triumph for the heroes."

"Much like real life then."

"Hey!" Jonathan protests, sitting up, "Don't write me off yet! I plan to have a happy ending."

"As a gentleman archaeologist?" Dio snorts, "Good luck with that."

"But when I find something amazing -- "

"What's left to find? They've already found Troy."

"Who knows?" Jonathan stands up, grinning, "But I'm sure it exists."

"In your dreams," his cousin sneers. But Jonathan is used to Dio's ways; he bids the other good-night before going to wash up. Dio does not linger in the parlor, going back to his room soon after. He changes into his nightclothes before brushing his teeth. The fated meeting between the star-crossed lovers stays in his mind however, and rather than dousing the lights, he stays up to finish the first canto.
Boccaccio is as amateurish and jarring as Dio remembers. There is a charming vitality to his works, stemming primarily from how flagrantly he inserted his own lovers.

He gets halfway through the second canto, sees Troilo introduced at least, before putting it on the nightstand and going to sleep.

Come Friday the twenty-fourth and Jonathan wakes him at ten to eight. They are expected in the Octogon at nine o'clock sharp; they're washed, brushed, dressed, and out the door by half past eight.

"Couldn't you have worn something else?" Dio laments as they turn right on University Street.

"I told you I didn't bring anything else," Jonathan replies.

"And I told you that you could wear any of my things in the meantime."

"I'm wearing your coat!"

"That was a present."

"I'm sure there will be other students wearing their old uniforms," Jonathan reasons, "Surely someone else must have forgotten to go to tailor's?"

As it is, although the overall size of Hugh Hudson was immense when compared to Chichester (and indeed, it had a thousand students and three hundred academic staffers), the heavy division of departments meant even smaller class sizes. The first years of 1886 are roughly four hundred in number -- they are treated to a ten-minute long welcome by the undergraduate advisor, a speech which could be summed up as: 'I dislike being here just as much as you'. They are then split into schools. The Science students are sent into the North Cloisters, the Engineering students sent to the South; Medical Science students are sent across the street. The Arts students, which both archaeology and law have been grouped under, are sent to the first floor. The auditorium they are grouped in feels strangely spacious -- due in large part to the divide amongst the genders.

"Oh," Jonathan whispers to his cousin, "I didn't think the rumors were true."

The thought of having women at lectures -- in Jonathan's lectures -- unsettles Dio as well. He maintains a straight face though, sparing the other side a glance.

"What did you think?" he whispers back, "This is a godless institution after all."

"Do you think they'll be in our departments?" Jonathan frets.

Dio does not get to reply as the Dean of the School of Arts clears his throat. Rather than another dry lecture, the man explains, he has decided it would be more productive to introduce the students to their individual departments and departmental tutors. He pulls out a list of names and departments and instructs the students to follow their respective professors. As Archaeology is the first department to be called, Jonathan takes his books and papers, scurrying after the professor.

The gap between archaeology and law is a wide one and Dio is left to stew alone for half an hour. Already, the gears in his mind are turning. He needs to get rid of Jonathan's classmates -- it was bad enough that they existed, but that both of them were women... Jonathan is the sort of fool who fell for the first girl who gave him the time of day. He does not want a repeat performance; it's far too late for that.

It was a mistake to come to Hugh Hudson, he thinks. Had they enrolled at Oxford or Cambridge...
And then his name is called and he is asked to follow a Professor Henry to the Department of Law. As with Archaeology, the fresh blood for Law is a trickle at best -- there are two students besides himself.

As circumstances would have it, the Oriental student is the same man who had witnessed his pickpocketing at Saint Pancras.

Shit, Dio thinks. He keeps from freezing however, smiling cordially and introducing himself. The Chinaman is named Bernard, Pei, or Wei; he has little idea how Eastern names worked. He is the son of the compradore who is, in turn, the adopted son of an American missionary. His English is stilted but what he lacks in pronunciation, he more than makes up in enunciation. What is important, however, is that he gives Dio a telling smile -- *I know your secret*, Dio hears.

He needs to get rid of this loose end and he needs it done fast.

His other coursemate, sensing something (or, more likely, sensing nothing), interrupts the two of them, heartily introducing himself as James Pyrce. The professor returns with the main undergraduate lecturer, casually doffing his hat before leaving.

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On the other side of the campus, albeit for different reasons, Jonathan is sweating bullets too.

Reminding himself to keep breathing and *do not look, do not dare look*, he tries to remember the last time he interacted with a member of the fairer sex. There had been female servants in Chichester, certainly, and a couple mothers had asked him to dance with their daughters at the previous gala, but outside of those fleeting instances, the last time he had talked to a girl had been with Erina. But these were classmates, not playmates, and he most certainly would have to work with them -- it was a class of three after all.

There needed to be guides on this sort of thing, he fervently thinks, trying very hard to concentrate on what the professor was saying -- required reading and recommended materials and whatnot. How far apart were they expected to sit? Was he expected to talk with him? Should he write to their parents (or spouses) asking permission for conversation? Surely the university wouldn't permit them to work on assignments together!

Thankfully, his coursemates seem to take little issue with his presence. They seat themselves at the far end of the room, gazing glued to the front, and Jonathan eventually follows their lead.

The department of archaeology, Professor Newton notes, has its roots in the school of fine arts. However, it has long since outgrown its foundation; archaeology is now an entirely different beast from art history, of this, there can be no doubt. He waxes poetic on the beauty of unearthing new artifacts, something which excites all three students, and then speaks on his own excavation experience. He admits that his own interests lie in the classical fields -- which, after looking at their admission's letter, none of them seem to be interested in -- but the tools of the trade, especially the basics, are homogenous throughout.

Jonathan's interest is piqued further then. When the professor steps out for a smoke, calling in a junior lecturer to continue the induction, he is almost tempted to ask.

'What *are* you interested in?'

But he is unable to make the question more refined and thus keeps his mouth shut. Dio would have no problem in these sort of situations like this, he finds himself thinking. If Dio had any female
coursemates, Jonathan is certain his cousin would have struck up conversation just fine.

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It turns out that the Viscount's heeding of "attend orientation on a full stomach" had not, in retrospect, been hollow advice. More than grueling lecturers or long walks from one end of the academy to the next, the English tradition of 'drink 'till you're drunk' makes itself at home even amongst the godless.

And so Dio finds himself three cups in and in the middle of his fourth, seated at a table in the uppermost floor of the Hugh Hudson Pub. His coursemates are two and nine drinks in respectively; the lecturer in charge of first years has worked his way through half a keg.

Alcohol, strangely enough, has its way of relieving tensions.

Five drinks in and Dio's lips have loosened sufficiently, so that he is able to nicely ask his coursemate (whose last name, they have all recently discovered, is Wei) to put the matter of pickpocketing behind them.

"But of course," his fellow student replies, looking appalled, "I enjoy a similar sport myself. I must say your technique is superb, Mr. Brando."

Wei speaks so quietly, Dio almost misses his acquittal. How neatly the situation resolved itself, he thinks. And then Pyrce butts in, hollering:

"What? What? Why're you guys smiling?"

"None of your business," Dio snaps-slash-slurs. The handful of drinking nights at Chichester had done little to bolster his alcohol tolerance; he dances past the line separating 'tipsy' and 'pissed' and promptly vomits onto the floor.

"Oh, gross," their lecturer winces, "Mr. Brando, are you alright?"

"Quite," Dio insists, rubbing at his temples.

"I'll get some towels," Pyrce volunteers.

"I'll get some water," Wei adds.

The two of them return soon enough, and even the lecturer gets on his knees to mop at the floor. What a ridiculous scene, Dio muses while drinking the proffered water, to have coursemates and lecturer cleaning up after him! His efforts to start on the right foot, to display his intellectual superiority from the get-go, are tossed in the bin. The curriculum is interesting, to say the least, and the prospect of mock debates intrigues him. His fellow students, or what he knows of them, are oddly suitable as well. The youngest son of a Chinese magnate and the eldest son of a Scottish banker, neither lorded nor landed but clearly in possession of deep pockets.

It could be bearable yet, he supposes.

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"Dio," Jonathan greets, as he stumbles home past midnight, "Dio, where have you -- " he wrinkles his nose, frowning, "Have you been drinking?"

"Departmental bonding," Dio cites, loosening his tie and heading straight for the bathroom. In the
tub, he soaks his muscles for a while, stretching his limbs before lathering up and washing off.

Jonathan accosts him the second he steps out.

"Dio," his younger cousin says, looking entirely too serious, "I need your help."

Dio has his suspicions, but he refuses to dwell on them. He's already dreading the thought of the morning after. And so, he rolls his eyes, neatly stepping to the side.

"It can wait," he flippantly replies, "I'll see you in the morning, Jojo."
Jonathan stays up for most of the night, worrying needlessly on whether Dio would be well enough to coach him through basic etiquette. His fears are confirmed Saturday morning when he cautiously opens the door to his cousin's room, only to be greeted with a beast-like snarl and a pillow to the face. He forgets his own concerns for a moment, stepping in to press his hand against Dio's forehead.

"What are you doing?" Dio growls, batting his hand away.

"You don't seem feverish."

"Because I'm not. Now go away." Jonathan watches his cousin cover his face with a pillow. He tuts, tempted to lecture on the importance of alcohol consumption in moderation, but thinks better of it. He gets a glass of water and some sailor's biscuits and places them on the nightstand. Then he closes the door, checks the time, and sets about getting ready.

After the conclusion of orientation, Jonathan had wanted nothing more than to go back to the flat and ask Dio about propriety. Unfortunately for him, his classmates had sent him a missive (delivered by the professor himself). It was nothing scandalous, simply an invitation to afternoon tea on Saturday in the Maple Leaf café, but Jonathan had turned bright red after reading it all the same. He had written back an affirmative, though he had to deliver it himself, and they made plans accordingly.

At the present, he strains his brain, trying to come up with a scenario where a gentleman might meet with two ladies. Perhaps... a potential spouse and her mother-in-law? Or the sisters of a recently-deceased friend? Women of the church tended to pay visits in pairs, did they not -- yes, he concludes, that was probably the best way to go about this: treat the two ladies as if they were women of the church. He needs to be respectful, polite, gentle, and courteous. But which trait was most important? If it was a choice between being respectful and being courteous...

He pulls at his hair, throwing a helpless glance at Dio's closed door. There were so many things he wanted to ask Dio -- of course the other would imbibe in excess on orientation!

He is being unfair, he knows, but he is also approaching hysteria. All he has to wear is his school uniform, which he has already worn for four days. Did it smell? Of course he didn't think he smelled, but women were much more sensitive -- and they certainly didn't smell. He hopes they won't sit too close to him and adds a prayer for the tailor to hurry his other outfits along, before angling this way and that before the mirror. He had an assortment of ties, at least. Should he go for something more colorful? He worries that they'll think him boring otherwise.

In the end, Jonathan spends so much time hemming and hawing over his appearance, it is a quarter to two the next time he glances at the clock. He pulls on his boots, grabs an umbrella, and buttons his coat, and just remembers to quietly close the door. He is a little jealous of Dio, he admits to himself while hurrying to the café. Of course his cousin wouldn't need to study with women!

Jonathan is extremely relieved then, to find that the café is a conservative one -- which is to say the sexes are segregated. His coursemates are seated behind a folding screen; he can see the outlines of their dresses and little else.

"Mr. Joestar I presume?" the waiter asks.
"Ah, yes," Jonathan replies, quickly shedding his overcoat, "I'm here for a -- "

"Mrs. Nuttall and Ms. Murray, yes," the waiter takes his coat and umbrella, motioning for Jonathan to follow, "This way, if you please."

Jonathan is seated at a table for two on the opposite corner of the café with a view to the street outside. He finds that if he tilts his teacup at the right angle, the silver of the spoon allows him to see the shade of his classmates reflected albeit upside down. He catches himself before he starts squinting however, quickly placing the saucer back down.

Saturday afternoon, especially before the start of term, meant that business in the café was slow. As such, the waiter had no issue bussing the messages from one side to the other.

Good afternoon, one of the ladies writes in a flourished script at the top of a piece of parchment. She commences with the usual pleasantries, how are you, was it difficult finding the location, which Jonathan is happy to follow up. He quickly responds via fountain pen, folding the parchment in half and giving it to the waiter. While waiting for their response, Jonathan resists holding up the teaspoon. Treat them like nuns, he reminds himself, and always be a gentleman.

It's actually quite fun, he finds himself thinking. Like letter-writing, but more immediate. After the greetings had come and gone, they had started asking questions about each other, their interests and passions and so forth. This was why he had insisted on archaeology. This was why he had come to Hugh Hudson. To have classmates who were more knowledgeable than him, with interests in similar yet different fields, and to be able to teach and learn through dialogue...

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Dio, on the other hand, sleeps like a log throughout the night. In the morning, he is rudely awakened by Jonathan, who is excitedly babbling about something or another. Dio throws a pillow at his cousin, screaming for him to close the door. He can't remember how many glasses of beer he had last night. Too much, that was certain. Jonathan titters, forgetting his own concerns for a moment, and Dio feels a warm and familiar palm against his forehead. He growls something, in no mood to humor the other, and Jonathan goes away.

When he wakes again, there is a glass of water and a plate of biscuits on the nightstand. His throat is parched and his stomach is aching; he must have stumbled to the washroom in a stupor half a dozen times at least. He munches through the biscuits, exercising his eyes in the meantime. Then he gets up and stretches, pleasantly surprised to discover both head and body free of aching. And then he pulls back the curtain and sees the reason why: it's already sunset on Saturday.

And as for Jonathan... Jonathan who had been asking for help last night.

He dashes out of his room clad in his nightclothes only to see his cousin standing in the kitchen.

"Ah, Dio," Jonathan greets. He's cutting vegetables while dressed in his Chichester uniform. "How are you feeling?"

Dio mutters a quiet 'fine' before shuffling back to his room. A glance at his pocketwatch reveals it to be half past five. He dresses quickly, irritated at having wasted a whole day, and returns to the kitchen.

"I burned the lamb again," his cousin winces, "It's more difficult than it looks."

"I swear this cookbook is cursed..." Dio grumbles, looking at the current recipe.
"The vegetables should be fine. Those instructions were straightforward at least." Jonathan drops the assortment of reds and greens into the already-boiling water, adding a pinch of salt before putting on the lid.

Dio mutters 'we'll see about that' and goes back to his room, making leeway on the Boccaccio piece. When Jonathan calls for supper, he's almost done with the second canto. He should have brought an Italian-English dictionary along, he thinks. As it was, he had to make do with Latin cognates.

"What is this?" he asks at the table while fishing around the soup-like mixture.

"Uh," Jonathan starts, poking around too, "Well, this is a piece of spinach," he puts the soaked sprig in his mouth and chews thoughtfully.

"I thought you hated spinach."

"I do, but the recipe recommended them! Madame Acton says they're a good beginner's meal!"

"For whom?" Dio snorts, spooning out a slice of radish, "Monks?"

"It's edible at least, isn't it?" Jonathan insists. "Oh, look, here's a piece of artichoke!"

"It needs more flavor."

"At least it isn't burnt."

"Good point." He concentrates on eating then and finds that the broth is actually quite acceptable when paired with bread. Sure, it could do with more salt, and possibly some leftover oil, but it was definitely edible. He finishes the bowl and asks for seconds, looking up to see Jonathan's beaming face.

"Wipe that grin off," Dio advises, "I promise I'll get the recipe for steak right before you."

"Oh would you?" his cousin requests, handing over the refilled bowl, "I've been puzzling over the instructions all afternoon. Even the Countess Fitzroy has no idea."

"I doubt she knows how to cook."

"You might be right," Jonathan laughs then, "Well, keep your efforts up and we might get to host a dinner party!"

Dio almost laughs as well. But the implications do not escape him and he frowns instead.

"So," he starts, keeping the accusation from his tone, "I take it you're acquainted now? With the other two?"

"With my coursemates? Oh, yes, they asked me to tea today -- I was actually planning on asking you for tips on etiquette!" Jonathan chuckles, shaking his head, "Thank goodness they knew what to do. It was all very proper, I'm starting to see how the lectures can function."

"With both sexes, you mean?"

"Mm-hm," Jonathan finishes his own bowl, standing up for seconds. He breaks the second bread loaf, offering Dio half before sitting down again.

"So?" Dio prompts.
"So do you like them, he's too scared to say.

"So what?"

"How do you find them? Have you exchanged names, at least?" He stops, remembering proper etiquette, and blanches, "You didn't talk to them in public, did you?"

"Oh no, of course not!" Jonathan flushes, "I know that much, at least!"

"How did you communicate then? Charades?"

"You jest," Jonathan sniffs, turning his spoon, "But they seemed used to it. We spoke through letters."

"Through letters."

"Yes, it was very clever, I think. They invited me to a café where we were the only customers and then we exchanged messages back and forth." Jonathan refrains from mentioning how they had run out of paper within an hour. It would be most unchivalrous, he thinks, to give testimony to a lady cursing. He subsequently also skips the part where his coursemates had ordered their dividing screen folded back and had actually conversed with him, predicting correctly that his cousin would throw a fit.

"And how long did this last?" Dio presses, rightfully suspicious.

"An hour... no, maybe two?"

"So the three of you communicated via parchment-and-quill for two hours?"

Jonathan nods.

Though Dio has already determined that he will pay their study group a visit in the immediate future, at the present, he relaxes, finishing his second bowl. He shakes his head, declining seconds, and toys with the remaining slice of bread. His cousin's eyes dart here and there, perpetually expectant. Jonathan is not to blame here he knows; had Dio not wasted the day away, he could have accompanied Jonathan to the café. Perhaps he could have brought up Erina -- a move in bad taste most certainly, but an extremely effective warning.

"Go on then," he concedes, "Tell me about your coursemates."

It is his cousin's most endearing quality, how even now, Dio can read him like a book.

Jonathan grins then launches into an eager narrative about his two coursemates. How, although they were women, they were clearly well-read. One of them, a Miss Murray, was fluent in both French and German and the other one, a Madame Nuttall, had recently published a paper on Mesoamerican tokens of death.

"Wait," Dio interrupts, "Madame Nuttall?"

"That's what Miss Murray said to call her."

"She's married, then?"

"I suppose so," Jonathan shrugs, "I didn't think it polite to ask."

"And what of the other one?"
"Miss Murray?" Jonathan shrugs again, "I guess she's not married? From what I could tell, she seems to defer to Madame Nuttall, although..."

"Although?"

Oh, well, I didn't ask of course, but I think -- " It is comical, how Jonathan drops his voice to a whisper here, as if the aforementioned woman were in earshot, "Madame Nuttall is the elder."

Jonathan chatters at length on how excited he is about the rest of the degree. How they spent the latter half of the afternoon looking at the rest of the university prospectus (how they managed this while sitting on opposite sides of the café he does not bother explaining) and had already made plans to attend an additional dozen lectures together. There were subjects which they were all interested in -- history, art, architecture, and so-such -- and specialty courses which catered to specific branches of archaeology.

Dio tunes him out in favor of organizing his thoughts on the coursemates. If Madame Nuttall was as old and married as Jonathan implied, she would be no threat. Jonathan is the sort of idiot who finds affairs inconceivable after all. But as for the other woman -- practically a girl, if Jonathan's fleeting descriptions were to be trusted. It frustrates him, that his cousin is continually so close yet so far. He feels that he is chasing until his lungs give out, only for Jonathan to return on a whim.

Realistically, he knows that the other is still feeling the death of the Pendleton girl. Though half a decade has passed, Jonathan has yet to cease wearing black on the anniversary of her death. His declaration to the other boys at Chichester had likely rung of truth as well; that he was, on some absurdly childish level, determined to love no other.

It is just as well, Dio muses, just as well --

"What about your coursemates?" Jonathan asks, stopping himself. "How many are there? Do you like them?"

"They're alright," Dio answers, "One is Chinese, the other is Scottish. Both are men, of course."

"Just two?" Jonathan clarifies, looking surprised.

"As far as I know."

"Wow," he grins then, "I guess we'll be in similar situations again! I mean, being the odd man out and all. Do they speak English?"

"Of course they speak English," Dio snorts, "This is a university."

"Do they... teach it in the East?"

"Presumably. His father is a compradore so it's likely the whole family is fluent."

"And are they the same age?"

"How should I know? Do you know your coursemates' ages?"

"That's different," Jonathan pouts, "I really wanted to ask though!"

- Their first Sunday in London stands as testament to how sheltered Jonathan has lived and how long Dio has been away. They make the mistake of thinking the capital is like the countryside and
stumble into the first cross-bearing building they see. It is only after the sermon has started that they realize the leading priest is not wearing any style of robe they recognize.

"Oh God," Jonathan whispers, clutching at his cousin's sleeve.

"Shut up," Dio hisses back, keeping his gaze trained on the minister.

"Dio, we're not supposed to be here!"

"You think I don't know? Just -- just keep quiet. We'll sneak out when they're singing or something."

Between the lack of accompanying instruments and the worshippers' opened eyes, the opportunity for escape never presents itself. Instead, the two of them follow along through a half-dozen Psalms, concluding with the passing of a collection plate.

"Is it sacrilege to give?" Jonathan worries.

"I'm pretty sure it's the opposite," Dio bites. He tosses a couple shillings in, rolling his eyes when Jonathan does the same.

After the plate has come full circle, the minister thanks them before calling an end to the service. They would have been able to make a clean exit, however --

"Brando!" a now-familiar voice booms, "Brando, is that you?"

Dio winces, turning around. Jonathan shoots him a panicked look which he steadfastly ignores.

"Pyrce," he greets with a nod, "Hello to you too."

"Good lord, why didn't you say you were Presbyterian?" his coursemate asks, clapping him on the back.

"I'm not."

"We went into the wrong church by accident," Jonathan frantically explains, dipping his head, "Please forgive us!"

"Oh." Pyrce says, frowning. "That makes sense, I guess." He looks from Dio to Jonathan, raising an eyebrow, "I don't believe we've met?"

"Oh, no," Jonathan extends his hand, smiling weakly, "I'm Jonathan Joestar, nice to meet you."

"James Pyrce," the other boy replies, shaking firmly, "The same." He looks between the cousins, "So are you brothers or...?" In a clandestine manner, he strokes his left index finger with his right thumb.

"Cousins, actually," Dio cuts through. His gaze is hard, and for once, Pyrce catches his meaning. He smiles congenially, putting up his hands, "I see, I see. Mea culpa. Now, shall I direct you to an English church?"

"Yes," Jonathan nearly sighs, "I mean, if it's no trouble."

"None at all," he casts a sardonic glance at his coursemate, "Gee, how'd someone like you end up with Brando as a cousin?"
Pyierce leads them out of the church, pointing straight, "All Saints Church is the one you're looking for; it's on the other side. Their services are probably still going so you should run."

They give their thanks before taking his advice. It's a mad and wet sprint down Grafton Street and through the Hugh Hudson campus. They cut through the library, which Jonathan has yet to see, and Dio needs to pull his cousin away, ignoring his pitiful cry of have you ever seen so many books? It is a favor Jonathan returns when they're sneaking past the dissection room -- it is a pet peeve of Dio's, he knows, to have been deprived of a foundation in medicine.

Unfortunately, their shortcuts are for naught and they still need to make a circuit about Gordon Square. They burst in on the Anglican service soaking wet and out of breath, and dramatically stagger to the back aisles.

"Never again," Jonathan whispers.

"To think I missed a dissection for this," Dio mutters back.

- 

Lectures begin the following Monday and with them, a proper introduction to student life. Contrary to what the guides and handbooks advertised, being a student did not mean sitting around in small seminars, chatting about subjects at the professor's leisure. It included that, of course, but it was mostly lectures. What time wasn't allotted for required lectures was spent auditing non-mandatory lectures. The leftover time could have been spent socializing, but for Jonathan and Dio (and indeed, their coursemates), this meant desperately preparing for the odd seminar in the library.

As Jonathan never says anything out of the ordinary, and as Dio is so caught up in his coursework -- and very pleased to find a genuine challenge in besting his fellow students -- he tables the cross-examination of Jonathan's coursemates for a month. They share breakfast and supper on weekdays and all three meals on weekends. In a month, Jonathan learns two additional ways of preparing vegetables. Dio gives up on pots and pans altogether, finding the ground floor oven to be a more reliable method of cooking meat.

It is purely chance then, when he finally catches sight of Jonathan's coursemates.

Dio is searching for a corner to eat lunch with his own coursemates, when he hears his cousin's laugh. He turns left, only to see Jonathan sharing a table with two women. They're not sitting side by side -- clearly, Jonathan had some shame left in him -- but the way they were talking, laughing, touching --

It is beyond improper; it is appalling.

"...Brando?"

Dio ignores his coursemate, beelining for the archaeologists' table.

"Jojo," Dio smiles, clasping his cousin's shoulder, "What a surprise."

And Jonathan, damn his personality, manages to look completely unabashed.

"Dio!" he has the gall to greet, "How rare -- to see you here!"

Wei and Pyierce catch up to him then. Predictably, they do a double-take at the presence of women.

"Ah," Pyierce helpfully starts, zeroing in on the familiar face, "Joestar, was it?"
"Oh, yes," Jonathan grins, "Pyrce, yes? Long time no see!" He turns to the remaining law student, "And you must be Mr. Wei -- hello, I'm Jonathan. A pleasure."

"Just Wei is fine," the Oriental replies, "A pleasure to meet you too." He turns to the ladies, adding, "Would you mind if we ate here?"

"Not at all," the younger woman murmurs.

"Mr. Joestar," Jonathan's other coursemate scolds, "Introduce us, please."

"I'd like to," Jonathan admits, "But it's my first time meeting Mister... ah, meeting Wei here as well."

"A circle then," the eldest concludes. "Name and age, please."

"Ladies first," Pyrce grins, flopping into a seat.

"My, what a gentleman we have here." She smiles, opening her fan, before introducing herself as "Zelia Nuttall, age twenty-nine."

"Alice Murray," her coursemate follows up, "Twenty-three."

Jonathan and Dio are eighteen as is Pryce while Wei is twenty-one. The six of them engage in the usual pleasantries then, their fields of choice and special subjects and so-such. Dio tunes them out, focusing instead on Jonathan's coursemates. Despite her coquettish nature, Nuttall is wearing a wedding band. Any flirtations with Jonathan were out of the question. But as for Murray -- well, even though she is five years Jonathan's senior and a sight for sore eyes at that, Dio is quick to insist the Pendleton girl had nothing special in aesthetics either. But Jonathan had loved her straw-spun hair and sky-blue eyes, the same shade as the girl sitting to his side.

Throughout the conversation however, she remains as Jonathan had described -- perpetually deferring to Nuttall and offering, at most, murmurs of agreement.

("Oh, we were hesitant at first of course," Nuttall recalls, "But then we realized how ridiculous it was -- two grown women who were too shy to speak to a boy!")

On one hand, he knows it ridiculous to feel threatened. Miss Alice Murray is even plainer than the Pendleton girl (if such a feat were possible) and, between the relaxed postures and distinct lack of furtive glances, Dio is reasonably certain the woman's ambivalence is returned. On the other hand, the idea of a friendship between the two sexes -- between two unmarried and marriageable members of the opposite sex, is ridiculous. There would always be, if there wasn't already, one party who wanted more.

It is Pyrce, again, who interrupts his contemplation.

"What about you two?" the Scotsman demands.

"What about us?" Jonathan asks.

"How did two proper English gentlemen end up at a university like this?"

Jonathan, surprisingly enough, visibly bristles.

"What do you mean -- "

"Come on, Joestar, let's not pretend," he shrugs, looking amongst the six of them, "The rest of you
know what I mean, right? If Oxford or Cambridge accepted you, you'd leave in a heartbeat."

"That can't be true -- !" Jonathan declares, standing up in a spike of vehemence. He looks from student to student, but no one has the heart to meet his gaze. Dio purses his lips, lightly shaking his head.

"I'm sorry Mister Joestar," Murray apologizes, "I know you're fond of Hugh Hudson..."

"No, don't be," Jonathan mumbles, awkwardly lowering himself. "But -- really? None of you chose to come here?"

"Outside of the fact none of us are titled," Pyrce clarifies, "I'm Presbyterian, Wei is an Oriental, and the two ladies... well. Miss Murray might've passed, had she been a man. You're Anglican, yes? But as for Mrs. Nuttall..."

"They don't think highly of New Worlders here," Nuttall admits. Her smile has teeth.

"This is like the set-up for a joke," Pyrce remarks, "An American, an Indian, a Chinaman, and a Scot..." he returns to Dio and Jonathan, lacing his fingers, "And then we have you. Clearly English, certainly Anglican, and straight-laced as hell to boot."

"Privacy," Wei interjects, "Is something to be respected."

Pyrce merely 'hmm's', resting his chin. There's a challenge in his gaze, a dare Nuttall echoes.

"I came here for archaeology," Jonathan ends up explaining. "Cambridge closed its doors on account of family matters and Oxford only offered Roman archaeology."

"See, that's where we differ," Pyrce concludes, snapping his fingers, "I'd change special subjects like that if it meant acceptance."

"Same here," Wei agrees. He declines to mention that he had converted to the Anglican faith in hopes of increasing his chances.

"That's a sad way of looking at things," Nuttall murmurs, shifting her chin from one hand to the next. She does not, however, offer a counterargument.

Dio comes to his cousin's defense then.

"I didn't want to come here initially," he concurs, "But after having spent a month here..." he shrugs, wrapping up his leftovers, "It's not so bad. Not the bottom of the barrel, certainly."

"Hear, hear," Pyrce grins, "We're at the top of the bottom, I'll give you that."

"And," Murray adds, "We're certainly better than the Victorian School."

"Even though they got their charter first?" Jonathan, with spirits returned, goads.

"Rampant favoritism," Wei snorts, "What else is new?"

The six of them converse for a while longer, sticking to common interests like athletics and academics. It is bad form, everyone mutually agrees, to begin an acquaintanceship on the basis of religious differences.

"Well," Nuttall declares, lifting her sleeve to check the time, "That was a most enlightening conversation. It was a pleasure to meet you, messieurs Wei, Pyrce, and Brando. We've a lecture at
the hour however, and need to take our leave." She tosses her leftovers into the rubbish bin, neatly curtseying. Murray scrambles to follow suit. "Mr. Joestar," she addresses, tone impressively haughty, "Lead the way."

Jonathan leaps to his feet, shooting Dio an apologetic glance.

"Uh," he stammers, unconsciously betraying the unusual nature of the command, "Um, at your leisure?"

With a stilted gait, he leads the two women away, leaving the three law students at the table.

Wei, surprisingly, correctly ascertains the mood.

"I suspect we upset them somehow," he quietly concludes.

"Don't think too much of women," Pyrce recommends, "I've five sisters and I'll never understand any of them! Just when you think they're being reasonable, they throw your stamp collection into the chute!"

"You strike me as a terrible sibling," his coursemate retorts.

"It's a wonder your parents wanted more after you," Dio adds.

"Bollocks," the Scotsman huffs, "You don't want my advice, leave it then!"

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Afterwards, when they're huddled together in the library preparing for a formal seminar, Pyrce takes it upon himself to highlight another observation.

"You know," he starts, "I wouldn't be surprised if they thought of him as a servant. Your cousin, I mean."

Though Dio is annoyed to have his own impressions voiced aloud, he refuses to look up from his journal.

"Quiet," he commands, "Less talking; more writing."
And fill all your noodles with learning

When Jonathan returns to the flat, Dio is already lounging in the armchair, listlessly reading through a compendium of legal terms. He quickly says 'good evening' only for Dio to grunt in response, loudly turning the page.

Since it's Jonathan's turn to make supper, he ducks into the kitchen to keep himself busy. He had suspected his cousin would disapprove -- had feared for the inevitable discovery. He can understand Dio too, that's what makes the situation worse. A year ago, if someone had told him that he would be the odd man out in his archaeology class on account of being male, he would have laughed. It was absurd, to think that women wanted education at the university level -- that they would be a majority in any department. But here he is at Hugh Hudson, the only man in his class of three.

And if someone said that he would think nothing of speaking in public with an unmarried young woman, that he would go to a married woman's house without her husband's knowledge to compare translations of ancient texts... well, he suspects fists would have been thrown.

It is a matter which must be delicately approached, especially when Dio is concerned. Dio, who, at the end of the day, was concerned with his welfare. Jonathan knows he is a difficult person to live with, perpetually distracted by books in the library and always leaving the kettle on, and he is grateful, extremely grateful, to have a relative who will put up with his many foibles.

When he moves from the stove to the cabinet, he finds their usual plates missing. He glances at the table, only to see it already set. Dio is seated in his usual position, adjusting and readjusting the silverware.

Jonathan breathes a sigh of relief. Dio is intimidating enough, even outside mock trials; it heartens him to see the other in a conciliatory mood.

He ladles the medley of squash, peas, and beef into the main serving bowl, carefully setting it down on the table. Then he grabs a loaf of bread, breaking it in half, and follows his cousin in saying grace.

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When Jonathan begins to explain himself, Dio realizes how far they've come. The person before him is not the twelve-year-old boy who needed lessons in etiquette. He is also no longer the fourteen-year-old adolescent in need of moral reassurance. The Jonathan seated across from him has grown into the beginnings of a fine man, someone who is as fascinated with archaeology as Dio is with law.

For Jonathan, he can no longer be a teacher. The days of 'that's not how it is / why don't you try this method instead?' have passed.

He cannot be his cousin's colleague or coursemate or pupil.

Dio understands this too: in some sense, Jonathan has found a replacement for Cross in Nuttall. Yes, she was eleven years older than him, and a woman at that, but when he mentions her recent publication, recalling how fortuitous it was to discover someone who specialized in so similar subject -- well, although Jonathan refrains from using 'fate', Dio hears it nonetheless. It is an intellectual attraction based on interests and ideas, rather than the desire for a shared future.
This, he can permit.

No, more than that, he can encourage it.

Jonathan ends his monologue then, looking anxiously in his direction.

Dio waits, saying nothing.

"I know how scandalous it all seems," Jonathan adds, "But... it's really quite proper. We never talk of anything other than archaeology."

And still, Dio keeps quiet.

"Do you think it's ridiculous? Is that why..." he trails off, uncertain.

Jonathan takes his hand then, as if they were boys once more, and looks at him earnestly.

"If you tell me to stop," he starts, wetting the corners of his mouth, "I will. I trust your judgement in these things."

And this, Dio knows, is what he's been waiting to hear.

_You still matter. I still value your opinion. I still hold you in the highest of regards._

He squeezes back, shaking his head.

"Let the wider public cover their eyes," he replies, quirking his lips, "I would not deprive you of your coursemates." He actually does smile then, popping the last morsel of bread into his mouth, "Judging from our prior conversation, they seem most well-read; I cannot fault you for enjoying their company."

Had the table not been between them, Jonathan might have hugged him. As it is, he squeezes tight, lowering his head and hunching his shoulders.

"Thank you," he professes, "Thank you -- for understanding."

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For reasons Dio does not pursue, the two groups of archaeology and law do not meet up again that term. Part of it is a difference in interests: they had come to Hugh Hudson to study one subject, it was only natural to want to talk exclusively about said subject, especially with coursemates in the first year. The overarching reason is one of propriety however. Nearing the end of the first term, Pyrce asks if his cousin's coursemates are still 'the same'. Dio replies in the affirmative, figures Jonathan would have told him otherwise, and the Scotsman makes a disparaging noise. Wei agrees, saying it's troublesome enough being the only Oriental and how he can't imagine being the only man.

On the archaeologists' side, though it's never explicitly stated, for Murray and Jonathan are keen on appearances, there is an underlying discomfort. Associating with Jonathan was bad enough, to be found in the company of otherwise-strangers is obscene. Perhaps there is an uneasiness stemming from Mr. Wei's presence as well (Nuttall remarks, once, that Orientals were such strange people, you could never know what they were really thinking) but again, nothing is explicitly stated.

Neither Murray nor Nuttall request a second meeting and Jonathan, still perplexed over Nuttall's abrupt departure from the first luncheon, does not return to the subject.
And so, when the first term draws to a close, the students part ways for the Christmas holiday. Nuttall is going to see her husband in France; Murray will visit her sister and brother-in-law in York; Pyrce invites Wei to celebrate Christmas with his family as they will both remain in London. Dio and Jonathan return to the Joestar manor to be greeted with the comforts of ready-made food and familiar serving staff. Neither of them get to luxuriate long however, as Mr. Joestar whisks them away within days to a nearby countryside estate for another joint Christmas and Boxing Day celebration.

The Viscount, Dio is pleased to note, has been hard at work bringing the Joestar name out of the mud. He has paid his fine in full and been given back his seat in Parliament. Business in India is booming, what with the family representative in the second seat of the council, and the other nobles -- mired in various European conflicts -- are eager to welcome the Viscount back into their fold. He accepts their invitations and compliments with usual amount of grace and just like that, pulls both son and nephew with him into the limelight.

Jonathan and himself are the talk of the party: tall, broad-shouldered, well-read, and the shared heirs of an enormous estate. Sure, they were currently being educated in London, rather than the proper universities, but they went to the right church and were sure to go places in life.

The ladies who turned their noses less than a year ago now turn their heads: look at the Joestar boys, their mothers whisper, the most eligible bachelors on the table.

With all fairness, there are sons from older and grander families who are roughly the same age. Like Cross and Donagan however, they are already entangled with previous engagements.

This is how matches are made amongst the aristocracy with the newer families trying to ingratiate themselves further and the older families attempting to maintain ailing fortunes. And so it is that the daughter of an Marquess surprises everyone by asking Jonathan for a dance. Dio bites back a smile when his cousin predictably declines. The cluster of spectators gasp in unison and the Countess raises her hand. Jonathan, who cannot survive with wolves, just turns his cheek, prepared to suffer a blow.

Dio intervenes then, catching her hand and bringing it to his lips. With lidded eyes and soft voice, he asks if she might be satisfied with a dance from him.

She dances well enough but fails to incite any interest. The girl's fault is that she is not Jonathan. Jonathan, who still tends to the hole in his heart. Jonathan, who goes on to decline four other offers and will doubtlessly have to suffer through accusations of sexual indecency or general misconduct. Dio entertains the four additional rejects, dancing with three more after that. Their mothers tell him their names; he cannot remember any of them. It does not matter if they found him suitable for he is in no need for a wife.

After an extended search, he finds Jonathan leaning against one of the garden columns.

"Oh," his cousin murmurs, startling slightly, "It's you."

"Is it difficult?" Dio asks, genuinely curious, "To reject them like that?"

"Of course it is," Jonathan answers, "Do you think I enjoy it?"

"But are you tempted?"

"Oh, no. Never." He straightens his arms, looking up to the stars, "It's difficult to explain, because it doesn't hurt. Most of the time, at least. But I feel... like something is missing. Father would
understand, I think. He never remarried." He blinks back tears, looking to his cousin and chuckling, "I'm sorry Dio! I'm doing a poor job of selling love but it's a wonderful feeling -- honest!"

'I know,' Dio wants to say.

*I've known for a long time.*

He holds his tongue of course, tilting his head to look at the sky.

Jonathan takes this as a cue to sidle up, conspiratorically placing a hand on Dio's shoulder.

"So," his cousin starts, and Dio can *hear* the smile in his tone, "Five dances, was it?"

"Eight, actually," Dio groans, "It's a wonder my shoes don't have holes."

"Only one with each girl?" Jonathan tuts, "I'm sure someone must have requested an encore. Erina and I had five dances, you know?" He drops his voice to a whisper, adding, "Father told me she probably liked me, even then."

The thought of how he had nearly lost Jonathan makes Dio sick. He bites back the bile however, shrugging his cousin's arm off.

"I have no time for romance," he snaps.

"So you say now," Jonathan laughs, suddenly an expert, "But don't worry! When you're in love, you'll *make* time."

Two days after the ball, when they had settled back into the manor, Mr. Joestar takes his son aside. He tells him that he understands grief, but as it had already been five years and Jonathan would soon be turning eighteen, it was important to look to the future.

Jonathan swallows, looking at his father.

"If you tell me to court someone," he quietly says, "Then I will."

"You're almost of age," the Viscount replies, "There is little left to tell you to do."

Mr. Joestar promptly apologizes then, recalling the depths of his own grief, and embraces his son. He tells Jonathan how proud he is, how wonderfully his son has grown up, how happy his wife and parents must be, smiling down on them from heaven. He adds that the university has written commending Jonathan's enthusiasm in archaeology and reiterates the importance of moderating his passions.

"I do not want you isolating yourself," he concludes, "To have you pursue a subject at the cost of everything else... it is a very lonely existence. To mindlessly chase knowledge is as dangerous as ignorance."

"Why?" Jonathan asks, "Is it wrong to want to learn more?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," the Viscount is quick to clarify, "But I do not want you to end up alone."

"What a strange concern," his son laughs, "You'll still be here, won't you?"
"Jojo," his father sighs, "Children are to outlive their parents. It is the natural order of things."

"Dio, then," Jonathan easily amends, "So long as Dio is here, I won't be alone."

"Don't take advantage of your cousin's kindness," the Viscount chastises, "Unlike you, I saw Dio accepting many a dance at the ball. I wouldn't be surprised if one of those girls asked their parents for a follow-through." He pauses to pat his son's head, marveling at how tall the boy had grown, "Don't allow your grief to hold Dio back."

"Perish the thought," Jonathan solemnly promises. Already, he has dreams of being best man and uncle.

"Alright then," the Viscount heaves another sigh, "I've said what I wanted to say. The rest is up to you."

Jonathan bids his father good-night, returning to his own room.

In the room adjoining the Viscount's study, Dio sets down a glass, mulling over the conversation between father and son. Had he been twelve or even thirteen years old, he would have wanted to puke. That Jonathan thought himself entitled to Dio's company for the rest of his life simply because their parents had been siblings (and practically estranged siblings at that), used to be nothing short of sickening. Now, however, he finds his pulse quickening as a pleasant flutter settles into his skin. It is one thing for Jonathan to enjoy his company. It is something else entirely to know that his cousin could see them cohabitating for the rest of their lives.

Quietly, he exits the room, returning the glass to the kitchen before making his way up the stairs. Within days, he will be of age to inherit his half of the estate.

When neither the Viscount nor his son are dead a week into the new year, Dio wonders where he went wrong. Jonathan is snoring on his shoulder, leaking drool from his open mouth, and the two of them are en route once more to London. He could shove his cousin to the side or better yet, out the door. Though he has long ceased fantasizing about the other's murder, it does not mean the ideas have disappeared.

It would be so easy, he wistfully thinks.

His fatal error then, had been getting to know the other boy. Because more than the sixty-six rooms and a hundred thousand crowns, he wants Jonathan.

Right now, all is as it should be. And if he plays his cards correctly and maintains the status quo, the future will be most acceptable too. He will graduate with a first and go work in one of the city's firms. Jonathan will continue his studies, aiming for a master's and then doctorate no doubt, and Mr. Joestar will surely continue renting the flat.

So instead of throwing Jonathan out or slitting his throat, Dio strokes his cheek. He wants to twine their fingers and wrap an arm around his shoulder (around his waist). He settles instead for resting his head on top of Jonathan's, tuning out the bump-bump-bump of the carriage.

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When the snow has melted and they are painting the shimmering gold and green of the square below their flat, Jonathan pauses in his strokes. Just a week prior, a letter had come asking if Dio were amenable to a matchmaking session. Dio had declined of course, diplomatically using the excuse that he needed to concentrate on his studies.
"What?" Dio questions, dipping his brush into a garish purple.

Jonathan winces at the resulting combination.

"You're not swearing off women because of me, are you?" he blurts out, "Because I don't want to discourage you from experiencing love."

"Jojo," Dio sighs, cross-hatching away, "You are being ridiculous and presumptuous at that. Since when I have followed your example?"

Jonathan wisely keeps his mouth shut. The same effect is achieved with a knowing smile.

"As I said," Dio scowls, "I have no time for romance. Unlike you, I would not be satisfied with an upper second."

"Hey!" Jonathan exclaims, cheeks reddening, "That was careless error! And it was a Latin exam -- I didn't think we needed to review for that!"

"Whatever lets you sleep at night."

Jonathan huffs, violently splattering yellow on his canvas.

They paint in silence only for Jonathan to breach the quiet a second time, cautiously asking, "You don't think it's selfish, do you?"

"Being satisfied with an upper second?"

"No! I mean..." he flicks his brush, splattering both of them with flecks of birch-brown, "Well, marriage."

"How is that related?" Dio retorts, dabbing Jonathan's nose with orange.

"Well... you received that letter after all."

"What was the question again?"

"Is it selfish? To choose to remain unmarried?"

"Why would it be selfish?"

"Because that's not how things work," Jonathan shrugs, "People are supposed to get married and make families."

Dio does not answer immediately, trading brush for pencil to outline the bars of the gate. Jonathan rubs at his nose, leaving an orange smear on his smock.

"If you were certain," Dio begins, "That you could love no other, then I would argue otherwise."

There is a kindness in rejection, he goes on to say, for if you cannot treat a spouse as they deserve to be treated -- if you enter the marriage unwilling to love them whole-heartedly -- then isn't it better to reject them as a stranger, rather than a husband?

There's another stretch of silence as both of them work on painting.

Dio finishes first, signing his name with a flourish. By the looks of it, Jonathan is quite close too, dotting in the last patch of flowers.
"You're right of course," Jonathan agrees, depositing his brushes and pulling off his smock. He beams at Dio, clearly at-ease once more, and adds, "How lucky I am, to have a cousin like you!"

And then he catches sight of Dio's painting and retracts his statement in record time. Trees were not supposed to be purple, he insists, shielding his eyes from the avant-garde monstrosity.

"Go for a lithograph if you want accuracy," Dio snorts, "Not that you care for that either."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have no sense of perspective," he snaps, "Look here. Why are the trees the same height? For that matter, why is everything the same height?"

"It's because we're on a balcony," Jonathan whines, "At least my painting is clearly of Fitzroy Square!"

Who throws the first splatter, Dio doesn't know. But once they start, they don't stop until they run out of paint. By that time, their clothes (along with the balcony and both canvases) are dyed in mismatched patches.

How strange, he thinks, when he's scrubbing the paint from his hair, to have enjoyed a wasted afternoon.
Jonathan's nineteenth birthday comes and goes. The Viscount is unable to make it as his return voyage from Gibraltar had been delayed. He sends a missive along with a fruit basket as an apology. Nuttall, upon learning that the youngest member of their course was one year closer to adulthood, insists on a celebration -- a terribly colonial sentiment, Pyrce insists. Although the two groups of first years had had little contact since the ill-received impromptu luncheon, everyone nonetheless gathers about a table, offering well-wishes and toasts while making a mess of the cake. Not terribly inclined to sweets, Dio keeps a watchful eye on the festivities.

Pyrce and Jonathan are stuffing their faces while Murray and Wei avert their eyes from the carnage. It is with some satisfaction that he notes the cordial but never quite close amity between Jonathan and the girl. And then he notices that he is not the only one observing -- Jonathan's other coursemate, Nuttall, the eldest of the six of them, has a hawk's eye trained on the younger girl. Her gaze is certainly not malicious, but there is an intensity which Dio almost recognizes.

When she meets his eyes however, she only smiles sweetly before looking away.

It was Nuttall, he remembers Jonathan saying, who had insisted on cutting the luncheon short. And, Dio suspects, it is Nuttall as well who is actively preventing further consorting. The colonials were strangely old-fashioned about certain things after all. The idea of Jonathan spending an excess of time in the company of women irritates him however, so he files the matter away, to be brought up at a later time.

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"Madame Nuttall?" Jonathan echoes, raising his eyebrows. He stuffs another cut of steak into his mouth before shrugging, "I guess you're right. We've -- well, Miss Murray and I -- asked her twice, about meeting up with the three of you, but she seems... well, set against it. Something about propriety."

"She seems to have no qualms talking to you," Dio notes.

"Oh, well," Jonathan colors slightly, downing the rest of his water.

"Jojo," Dio chides, almost snarling, "You wouldn't think of -- "

"Never!" Jonathan insists. "I would not -- and certainly not with Madame Nuttall! It's just that, well, she thinks that Miss Murray and I are a good match."

Dio clenches and unclenches his jaw, willing his hands to still.

"...Is that how it is?"

It was possible Jonathan was reading too much into things. But then, his cousin was as thick as they got when subtle romance was on the table. No, at this rate, he would have to --

"Well, I don't think she approves of the difference in our ages. It's just that I'm a better match than Wei, according to Madame Nuttall."

And here, Dio loses his train of thought entirely, blinking twice before blanching.

"What?"
"Oh, I never told you? Miss Murray is quite taken with Wei," Jonathan shrugs again, "But apparently her parents are dead-set against it." The obvious well, he is an Oriental, adopted grandson of a compradore or not follows as an echo. Dio relaxes then, having little care for the love affairs of their coursemates, and Jonathan mistakes this to warrant elaboration. "As Madame Nuttall explained to me, the only British woman who married a Chinaman died within years. Miss Murray has the same middle name as that woman, so apparently she's doomed. I think it's possible though, with love. Differences of class and culture are nothing then, right?"

"What?"

"Don't you think mutual respect and affection can blossom outside your social group?"

"No," Dio scowls, stabbing vehemently at the stewed carrots, "Those are infantile delusions and you shouldn't entertain them."

"What!" Jonathan sets down both fork and knife, suitably affronted, "What do you mean delusions?! What about your parents!"

Dio grinds his teeth, forcing the sneer from his face. With measured movements, he neatly cuts up the rest of his portion.

"Yes," he lies, "I had forgotten about them. How silly of me."

Jonathan is boorishly good-natured as usual, quick to overlook and disregard that which did not fit into his worldview. Dio finds himself annoyed at the Viscount for buying into his father's lies. He's annoyed at Jonathan even, for unknowingly prodding old wounds. But most of all, he's annoyed with himself. It had been seven, no, nearly eight years since he'd poisoned the man, to know that his memory was being kept alive, even in hatred, was thoroughly unappetizing.

For a moment, he is tempted to say the truth. To tell Jonathan, at the least, of the reality of the situation. How his mother had had her library traded for liquor. How his father had beaten them both for imagined slights. How miserably his mother had died. The moment passes however, tempered well with a fear of reprisal.

His dear cousin, he is reminded, has no idea what he, Dio, is capable of.

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The long summer days harken the examination period of Hugh Hudson. While some first year students are required to sit in exams, neither Law nor Archaeology have such requirements. The archaeologists are to submit a book review; lectors are to sit in for a non-criminal hearing. And so it is that their coursemates part ways with them for the summer holidays. Wei is returning to family in China; Pyrce is off to Scotland for his middle sister's wedding; Nuttall is reuniting with her husband in Spain this time; and Murray's parents have found her a Sunday school position in Leicester. As Mr. Joestar is off on another voyage, Jonathan is intent on staying in London -- more specifically, staying in the university library -- throughout the summer. Dio follows his lead, partially to keep an eye on his cousin but primarily because (though he was loathe to admit it) he was still fighting tooth and nail to consistently place higher than his coursemates.

There is a thrill, he realizes, in academic competition. Back in Chichester, even in the upper divisions, there was no one who came close. But here, back in London, in the city he had learned to read and write, his classmates spend less time in the library and often receive higher marks! When he says as much to Jonathan, his cousin laughs.
"Now you know how I feel!"

The summer of their first year would have been spent in a bookish stupor had Jonathan not discovered stables and riding grounds just south of the city. It had taken much wheedling and whining, not to mention half a week's allowance, before Dio agreed to an afternoon ride. These were the pursuits of those with too much time. Normal people, he insisted, either walked places or took carriages. Jonathan spurns him into losing a race -- an outcome resulting from their horses, Dio insists. His cousin smiles and the lazily setting sun makes him dazzle.

"Father said we should relish these days," Jonathan mumbles into his cousin's shoulder when (previous case in point) they were packed into a carriage en route for Fitzroy Square.

"There'd be more to relish with a docile horse."

"But the stablehand said that one was skittish," Jonathan yawns, shifting to lean against the window, "It's your fault for picking it anyways."

"Just sleep already," Dio sighs, recognizing a lost cause on sight.

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The week before Michaelmas signals the start of a new term and with it, the return to London of all their coursemates. Law classes were set for all three years but archaeology courses were not. Dio is relieved to find Jonathan choosing different electives from his coursemates, though they would still be sharing the bulk of their courses. Whereas the orientation for first year students involved copious amounts of alcohol and drunken conversations with fellow students from the department, second years are permitted access into the Gathering of Clubs and Societies. In a two-day-long spectacle tucked away in the north cloisters, the various student run and organized groups plead, petition, threaten, and otherwise entice their peers to join along with their mayhem.

Upon learning of a Men's Casual Equestrian Society, Jonathan is dead-set on signing up for it. Dio, too, is about to follow Wei into the Men's Literature Society. Both their plans are summarily binned upon meeting the elder Kensington boy -- two years their senior and a fourth year student in the Medical Sciences department -- who immediately ropes first Jonathan and then Dio in to the recently formed Hugh Hudson (and constituent London universities) Rugby Union.

"Rugby?" Jonathan repeats.

"Yes," Kensington nods, "Rugby."

"I don't know..." Jonathan quibbles, "I'm leaning towards the equestrian society..."

"Joestar, Joestar..." the Kensington boy sighs, shaking his head, "You'd be wasting your potential slacking about on a horse! Look at those arms! Look at those legs!" He pulls one of his teammates over, "Chester, tell me what position my friend here would play!"

"Hooker," the boy grins, "Definitely hooker."

Jonathan flushes.

"What did you -- "

"It's just a name, don't think much of it!" Kensington interjects, brushing the other boy away. He loops his arms over Jonathan's shoulder and grins, "Now Joestar, think of it this way: we're in desperate need of someone with your bulk. So you can give a go and if you don't like it, no hard
feelings. What do you say?"

"Well..." Jonathan steps back to scratch at his neck, looking this way and that, "I guess when you put it like that... And I do owe your father so much..." He grins and sticks out his hand, "I'll be trying my hand at rugby then!"

"Fantastic!" Kensington beams, shaking firmly, "You'll love it, I guarantee you!"

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Jonathan stumbles back into the flat well after dark. There's mud and grass everywhere, from his arms and legs to his hair and even teeth.

"What the hell happened to you?" Dio demands, standing up from the table and immediately checking for injuries.

"Rugby!" Jonathan exuberates, "Oh, it's the greatest sport ever Dio, I only wish we went to Rugby to play it! I got to play hooker and lock, and two other positions in the back! Kensington said I was a natural; we'll have practice everyday until winter break!"

"Kensington?" Dio repeats, furrowing his eyebrows. "No, nevermind, you can tell me later, go wash up, you're filthy."

"But I'm starving!" Jonathan whines, looking dolefully at the leftovers.

Dio rolls his eyes.

"Go on then," he mutters, motioning to the still-set seats, "Wretched child."

After cramming three plates of food down his maw and then being shoved into the showers, Jonathan emerges from the bathroom swathed in a robe and glowing with happiness.

"Now," Dio says, looking up from his book and pointing to the once-spotless dining table, "Clean up after yourself."

"Sure," Jonathan grins, getting out the soap and towels. He hums the university song in his work, absent-mindedly drawing rugby formations in the suds. When he's done with the chairs and table and scrubbing at the mud on the floor, Dio finally gets off the couch to help out.

"So," he starts again, "Rugby."

"Mm!" Jonathan beams, "You should try it out if you have time! Hugh Hudson just started the club last year -- the national team has only existed for four years you know?"

"What about your horse riding club?"

"Ah, well, I can do that on my own time. Kensington said I could even use his family stables! Oh Dio, you really should come play... just to try it out!"

Dio snickers, "I didn't think you'd like such a barbaric sport, Jojo."

"But that's the thing!" Jonathan insists, suddenly the master of all things rugby, "It's not barbaric at all! Sure, strength is important, but up until a point -- " Here, he wipes away his previous doodling and outlines a rugby field in soap, "Take this formation for instance, even if the... I forgot his name... but, even if he made it through the half-backs, he would still have to deal with the two centers here and here. I don't think any amount of strength would let you overtake four other
players! But if you passed it to the hooker over there...

"Wait," Dio snorts, "There's a position called the hooker?" And then he frowns. "You're not it, are you?"

"Oh no! Chester thought I would make a good one, but I don't have the agility for it. Kensington wants me to be a lock, I think."

Less than a day later and Dio finds himself just as muddy as Jonathan, carried merrily on the shoulders of his new teammates.

Jonathan is biting his fist to keep from laughing.

"Oh thank you God!" Kensington shamelessly cheers, "Thank you for giving this team so many wonderful new players. Brando!" he heaves Dio back on his feet, clapping a hand onto his shoulder, "I was wrong about you, I'm sorry! Your speed and dexterity are going to make us champions! Whaddaya say? Wanna join the team?"

"So you're a hooker?" Pyrce whispers, loudly guffawing.

"It's just a name," Dio snaps.

"Oh, I'm sure it is!"

"Be quiet," one of the older students hisses.

Pyrce makes a face the second the other student turns away.

"Behave," Dio chides, scribbling studiously once more.

"First Wei and now you..." Pyrce grumbles, "I swear you guys are going to go bald from boredom!" He stretches his arms and legs, failing to notice the glares of the first years behind him, and heaves another sigh. "Where is Wei, speaking of which? He's never missed a class."

"Maybe he's sick," Dio shrugs, glancing over at Pyrce's blank notebook.

"Wei? Sick?" Pyrce snorts, "No way!"

"Misters Pyrce and Brando, please wait in the hallway," the lecturer instructs, pointing to the door.

"Sorry, sorry!" Pyrce apologizes, though he wastes no time in excusing himself. Out in the hallway, Dio is visibly stewing, "Now I have to warn you: my sisters have made me immune to the silent treatment."

"Oh can it," Dio grumps, "We'll be kicked out of the hallway too at this rate."

"You know what I think?" Pyrce asks, dropping his voice to a conspiratorical whisper.

"I don't care."

"I think it's a woman!"
"The lecturer?"

"No, Wei!"

"You think he's a woman?" Dio asks, taking a page from Jonathan's book. Pyrce doesn't believe him for a moment, hitting him on the shoulder.

"Oh come off it, you know what I mean. He's actually quite good with them, if you know what I mean," he waggles his eyebrows for effect. "Not at all like your cousin."

"This is the second time we've been dismissed from a lecture," Dio laments.

"C'mon Brando, cheer up. Life's too short to be sitting in stuffy rooms. Here, I'll let you borrow my notes!"

"What notes!"

"Okay, okay, we can both borrow Wei's notes."

"He'll be needing my notes for this lecture!"

"Don't bet on it!" Pyrce laughs, "You know Chinamen, they're a magical lot. I bet he can fly and teleport and all that. I read somewhere they were impervious to bullets."

At a loss for words, Dio keeps quiet.

- 

On the other side of the campus, Jonathan catches a glimpse of his cousin's classmate while walking back from a required course.

"Mr. Joestar?" Nuttall asks, tilting her head.

"I believe I saw Mr. Wei in there," Jonathan replies, squinting up at the second floor.

"What! Really?" Murray immediately perks up.

"So they're having class upstairs. Come on you two, let's get some lunch."

But Jonathan, who knows Dio's timetable as well as his own, isn't convinced. "You two go on ahead," he suggests, "I'm going to take a look." Without further ado, he dashes into the portico and up the south stairs.

Nuttall huffs, tapping one heel.

Murray gathers her courage then, stammering out a quick "I'll go see too!" before sprinting after her younger coursemate.

Upon clattering up the stairs, she sees Jonathan stooped in a thoroughly ungentlemanly fashion before the door. Murray taps him on the shoulder, smiling conspiratorically, before pressing her ear against the woodwork as well.

"For the last time, no!"

"But I -- you -- reconsider."
"I don't care if you are the grandson of a compradore, there's ethics to be had here!"

"So you're saying -- "

"That's precisely what I'm saying! Now if you'll excuse me, there are actual stories I need to deal with, not made-up Noahs!"

"Really, you two!" Nuttall exclaims, arriving on the second floor right as Wei exited the office. He nearly crashes into Jonathan and Murray.

"You there!" the man inside the office barks, "Do you have an appointment?"

"Oh... um, no," Jonathan says, trading perplexed glances with his coursemates.

"Then close the door and make one!"

After heeding the irritated editor's request, the four of them make their way back down the stairs.

"What was that all about?" Jonathan immediately asks.

"It's nothing," Wei murmurs, pursing his lips.

"I doubt it was nothing," Nuttall replies, "It sounded like you two were having quite the row. I could hear that ghastly man screaming from the first floor."

The lone law student remains silent.

"Lunch then," Jonathan declares, clapping his hands, "I'll treat today. Mr. Wei, would you like anything?"

"Yes!" Murray agrees, grinning too, "Come sit with us for a while! You look like you need it!"

Despite Nuttall and Wei's reservations, Jonathan dashes off for a plate of sandwiches and Murray leads them to an empty table. By the time the pitcher is emptied and only crumbs remain on the plate, they've exhausted all banal topics and then some.

Wei, whose complexion has returned to normal, bows his head in thanks, quietly adding, "You're right. I did need some company."

"Don't be like that, Mr. Wei," Murray insists, "I know we're not coursemates, but we're curious too."

"It's nothing really," he repeats, shaking his head. And then, seeing the variety of expressions, he exhales quietly. "Alright, but you probably won't believe me. About a month ago there was a flood in my homeland. Nowhere near where my family lived, but everyone in the country heard of it. I went back over the summer to see the situation."

He licks his lips, clasping and unclasping the glass, before continuing with: "It was the closest thing I had seen to hell on earth. The government estimated one million dead."

"If I may...?" Murray hesitates.

"Yes?"

"Alright, but you probably won't believe me. About a month ago there was a flood in my homeland. Nowhere near where my family lived, but everyone in the country heard of it. I went back over the summer to see the situation." He licks his lips, clasping and unclasping the glass, before continuing with: "It was the closest thing I had seen to hell on earth. The government estimated one million dead."

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"If I may...?" Murray hesitates.

"Yes?"
"What -- what is a 'million'?

"It's a very large number," Nuttall replies.

"More than a thousand?" Jonathan asks.

"A thousand thousands," Wei responds. He tears out a sheet of notepaper and writes a one followed by six zeroes.

"Oh," Murray says, "A lakh."

"I didn't know we had enough of anything to count that high!" Jonathan exclaims.

"What was it counting again? Gallons of water?"

"No, lives."

"Of animals?"

"Humans."

As one, the three of them stare down at the scrap of paper.


_It's likely more than that_, Wei refrains from adding.

"Is there... well, is there anyone left in your country?"

"Of course," Wei replies, laughing darkly, "I suspect we have more land and people than you."

But to lose so many...!" Murray presses a hand to her mouth, "I've heard of such disasters, out in the provinces, but a lakh's worth..."

"So the editor of the paper refused to run it because he didn't believe you?" Nuttall demands, "Why would anyone make up that sort of story?"

"Telling it to you three, I think I understand his point of view," Wei admits, "It is a disaster of... well, incredible proportion."

"Have any of our papers covered it?" Jonathan asks, "Surely you could use that as proof."

"Westerners don't frequent that part of my country."

"Well what about _your_ papers? Surely there are photos?"

"None."

They sit in contemplative silence for a while.

"Don't you have _any_ proof?" Murray insists, "Of course we believe you, Mr. Wei, but it would be easier for others to believe us with proof."

"I showed the editor this newspaper clipping but," he pulls said article from his knapsack, "He couldn't read it."

"But you can? Read it, I mean?"
"Of course."

"Then it's settled. We'll -- "

"Wei!" Pyrce interrupts, smacking his coursemate soundly, "You absolute cur! Where have you been for the past two lectures?! That fop Merriweather threw us out again, you know?" He tops his hat to the women, adding, "Oh, and good afternoon, ladies and Mr. Joestar. I see you've been enjoying tea and scones without us!"

"Sandwiches and lemonade actually," Nuttall laughs, scooting her chair to make room for Dio and Pyrce.

"Now," Nuttall sighs, resigning herself to the group of six, "I believe Alice has a solution."

"A solution? What's the problem?" Pyrce, of course.

"A million people -- " Jonathan starts, still looking slightly nauseous.

"Died in a flood in China." Murray finishes.

"And the editor of our school paper refuses to publish anything of the sort because he does not believe it possible!"

"Actually," Wei admits, "He was willing to publish it, provided I found a source that provided a smaller number. But even the lowest estimates were too high for him."

"A million people, really?" Pyrce whistles, "I think that's all of Scotland right there..."

"I can't believe we haven't heard about this at all!"

"I didn't believe it myself until I saw the damage."

A thousand groups with each group containing a thousand people. The thought of their waterlogged bodies plagues Jonathan's dreams for weeks afterward. Bloated and rotting, never even given a chance. He tosses and turns throughout the nights, thinking of the moral consequences. Was there a reason for their death? Would people ever discover a reason for catastrophe?

The third time Dio shakes him awake, he nearly clocks his cousin.

"For someone who dreams of digging up the dead, you've got a terrible set of nerves," Dio drawls.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan mutters, shakily downing the nearby glass of water, "I'll be fine, thank you."

Dio leaves then, blowing out the hallway lamp, and does not bring the episode up.

This is what Jonathan cannot say: I was relieved. Relieved that it wasn't us. That I didn't hear anything when it happened. That the sky didn't change colors because of it.

Murray's idea is to have an English translation of the Chinese article available as a pamphlet. Pyrce adjusts it slightly, noting that people needed a suitably spectacular headline to read anything these days, and Jonathan recommends taking turns handing out pamphlets at the main entrance of the
school. It is Dio, then, who smoothly lies to the paper's editor that the headmaster himself had seen
the pamphlets. By the end of the campaign, even the Victoria School has begun publishing the
story, pilfering Wei's translation word-for-word.

"Thank you," he says, after the especially hectic month. "Thank you for believing me."

"But is it enough?" Murray presses, wiping the ink from her hands.

"Don't get caught up in those sort of questions," Nuttall advises. Then she wipes her own hands too,
"Well, that's my good deed for the year -- shall we break for tea and crumpets?"

"It's wicked of me," Jonathan muses, hanging in the back of the six person procession with Dio,
"But I'm glad you agreed to this."

"Oh?" Dio questions, though he is expecting another patriotic spiel.

"Oh yes," Jonathan cheekily grins, "I was tired of being the only man, I confess."

Dio covers up his laugh with a cough, reaching out to pinch his cousin's nose.
"My word," Pyrce chatters as they shuffle into the aisles, "Not even snowing and it's already this cold!"

"You're a Hudsoner, aren't you?" the student in front of him sneers.

"What's it to you?"

"Of course you ponce can't stand the elements. I'll bet the furnace is already stoked in your lounges!"

"A pity Victorians can't afford the coal," Pyrce bites back, "But then, I'm sure your charity of the hour is a worthy cause."

"Mr. Pyrce," Wei hisses, dragging his coursemate to the leftmost spaces, "Don't make a scene."

"Did you see the looks those animals were giving me? So damn smug -- " he cups his mouth and hollers, "When we beat your asses into Sunday, we'll take your charter back too!"

"I'd like to see you try, you bloody Irishman!" the Victorian student shouts back, "It'll be like how you took back your Queen, huh?"

Wei rubs at his temples, seriously reconsidering his choice in company.

"Pyrce..." he repeats.

"I know, I know," his fellow student takes a series of deep breaths, "Joestar and Brando will win, no problem. Then we'll see who's a goddamn Irishman." He mutters something about the other student likely being an English Northerner (the worst of lot, he's already ingrained into Wei) before turning to the playing field. The players on the two teams had just finished warming up; friendly roughhousing notwithstanding, all fifteen of them looked ready to fight.

"Whoo-ee," he whistles, puckering his lips, "Everyone is an absolute giant. They're taller than my mother!" He turns to his coursemate, raising an eyebrow, "Can you even see them past this crowd, Wei?"

"Somewhat."

"Should we grab you a chair to stand on?"

"Don't you dare." He crosses his arms, squinting out at the field. Dio, surprisingly, was front and center on the Hugh Hudson side. Jonathan was behind and to the side.

"Well, if you insist..." Pyrce shrugs, cracking his knuckles. "D'you reckon they'll blow a whistle to start? Like at the races?"

"Doubtful," Wei replies, only to be interrupted by said whistle.

On the other side of the field, in a properly made tent, was the section for female spectators. In addition to having a roof and seats, there were also refreshments, which had been spilled on the floor and over various ladies' dresses in a pre-match catfight.
"Whose side are you on?!" a woman with a river of champagne dripping from her bodice shrieks into Murray's face.

"Um, well," she stammers, "Well, that is..."

"Hugh Hudson Academy," Nuttall crisply replies, somehow managing to step out of the dogpile with her hat intact. "Why?" she continues, "Is there a problem?"

"Not at all Ma'am," the other woman beams, "You're on the winning side! My dear Chester is going to maul the other team!" She is promptly dragged back into the chaos by another woman, also claiming to a Mr. Chester's lover.

"Oh Madame Nuttall, thank you so much!" Murray gasps, scurrying back to the older woman, "How can they behave like that? It's absolutely dreadful!"

"Harpies, the lot of them," Nuttall laughs, leading the two of them to their seats, "My mother always said women were to be feared. Now, pick up those binoculars will you? Oh, good, there are two of them." They prop two chairs up before seating themselves.

"This handle is sticky," Murray notes, wrinkling her nose.

"Don't press it to your face then," Nuttall instructs. "Oh, quiet down back there, the match is starting!"

- 

"You know," Pyrce conversationally begins five minutes into the match, "I just realized I haven't a clue how to play."

"Likewise."

"Like, I figured with how much Joestar talks about the sport, some of the rules would have rubbed off. But... I have no idea what they're supposed to do. Is there a goal? It seems like the ball is just going back and forth."

"It's not going forward though."

"Maybe they're supposed to make the goal themselves?"

"I suspect you're not supposed to pass it forward."

"No, no, that can't be right. Look, Joestar is -- " he pauses, as the referee interrupts, the game, "What was that for?!" Pyrce demands, chucking a wadded-up newspaper, "Something was finally happening!"

"Oh, the captain is talking to him now," Wei adds, craning his head to see, "He doesn't look happy."

"The Victorian School has the ball, of course he's not happy!"

"Oh, well," Wei shrugs, "Brando has the ball now."

"For how often the thing changes hands, you figure someone would have scored a point by now!"

"Is he past the halfway mark?"
"No, no, I don't think so." Pyrce pauses, "What's a halfway mark?"

"Is he halfway across the field?"

"Uh..." Pyrce furrows his brows in consternation, "He's shoving Joestar out of the way and getting tackled? At least, I think that's what's happening."

"This is quite wretched," Nuttall sighs, putting down her binoculars.

"What did you say?" Murray asks, fighting to speak above the din.

"I said," Nuttall repeats, "That this game is most wretched!"

"What's supposed to be happening now?"

"We're supposed to be winning!"

"We are!" another one of Mr. Chester's lovers shrieks, "We are going to win! We have to show those harlots from Westminster up!"

"I suspect this sport is not for me," Murray whispers, lowering her binoculars to brush some crumbs out of her hair.

"Couldn't hear a word, dear!"

"I said," she pauses, looking back at the game, "Oh! Madame Nuttall! Look, look!"

"What are they -- " Nuttall starts, frowning, "What are they doing?!"

"Being led off the field I think."

"But it's just the two of them!" she gets up, "We have to go ask why!"

"Maybe they're taking a break?" Murray posits, sounding less than certain.

"It's not even half way over, what do you mean a break?!" She pulls back the flap to the tent entrance, only to find a standing guard.

"Excuse me, Misses," the guard greets, dipping his head, "But we can't have you near the field. You might get hurt. You know how these blokes are -- "

"Oh come off it!" Nuttall exasperates, turning heel and stomping back into the tent. She mutters something along the lines of 'I bet they'd think twice if they knew the state of things'. She sits down again, crossing her legs and then her arms, before turning to the younger woman and adding, "We'll need to speak to Mr. Joestar about this! Making us waste a Saturday to watch him sit on the benches!"

"He looks bad enough as it is," Murray tsk's, raising the binoculars a third time, "A truly ghastly sport... the things men do for fun!"

"Oh god," Jonathan groans, burying his face in his hands, "Oh god, oh god, oh god."
"I thought you had memorized the rulebook!" Dio hisses.

"I had!" Jonathan insists, "It's just that we had gone ten minutes without scoring and you were ahead of me so I thought -- "

"You're an idiot for getting tackled at all."

"But Kensington said...!" Jonathan turns to his cousin, ready to explain himself. He catches a glimpse of the spectators however, and reburies his face with a wail.

"What is it now?" Dio grumbles, quickly scanning the crowds. He immediately sees the cause of alarm and curses under his breath. "Did you tell him we were playing?"

"No!"

"Kensington must've said something." Dio chances another glance and sure enough, the Duke Kensington is seated to the side of the Viscount Joestar.

"I want to die," Jonathan groans, "Do you think we can sneak out, somehow?"

"You?" Dio snorts, "How do you think I feel? Being called off the field along with you! I was doing great up until you let yourself get tackled!"

"But he was trying to get the ball from me!"

"You're not even supposed to be standing there!" Dio takes a deep breath, crossing his arms, "You know what, just wait and see."

"But I don't want to...!" his cousin whines.

They sit in near-solemn silence for the remainder of the match with Jonathan wincing from time to time. He looks at the field until he cannot look any more, then darts his eyes up to where the Viscount and Duke sat, before returning to look at the players. The feeling of shame gnaws away at him; he's caught between touched that his father had come to see a mock game and humiliated that his father had to see him benched. That the Viscount has made no move to leave despite both his sons being on the benches for the remainder of the game speaks volumes of his character and Jonathan feels his heart first swell and then clench.

It hurt, knowing he had disappointed his father again.

Kensington comes over to the benches after the game is over. Despite the loss of two players (forcing the captain to the front and the other lock to double-up), the Hugh Hudson team had managed to even out the score, though they still lost by five points.

"Kensington...!" Jonathan warbles, "I'm so -- "

He's cut off when the team captain neatly boxing his ears.

"Now wait a -- " Dio interjects, only to get his ears boxed as well.

"I had high hopes for both of you," the fourth year student growls, "But as you can see, we played better without you." He snaps his fingers to dismiss the other players who've gathered around the benches, "Good game today boys. Now why don't you wash up and I'll see you in the spring!" He turns back to the pair of cousins then, taking in Jonathan's cringe and Dio's scowl. And then he rubs his temples, because really, where was he supposed to begin?
"Kensington," Jonathan starts up, "I know I was in the wrong. But -- but it was so fun playing with
fifteen other players. I promise I'll practice harder for the next season."

"No, Joestar," Kensington sighs, "Do you even know where you went wrong?"

"I got in the way of the ball?"

"No, you tried to throw the ball forward," Dio grates.

"That's not even the start of it!" Kensington declares, tempted to throw his arms in the air. He
points at Jonathan, "You, Joestar, are the fourth lock. Your job is NOT to win the damn scrum.
Yes, your cousin is right, you're not supposed to pass forward and you can't tackle players who
don't have the ball, but more than that, we're playing a sport, not dancing! Did you see yourself out
there? I've never seen such manners! We ought to have given you a hat to doff at the other players!
There are many ways to play rugby Mr. Joestar, but there's only one way to win and that's to act
like someone hit your mother in the face with a two by four, you understand?"

While Jonathan is cherry-red and Dio is smiling smugly, Kensington turns his ire to the other
benchwarmer. "And you, Mr. Brando! You are the damn hooker, you are supposed to be winning
the scrum for us, not tackling people! It is your job to run the ball to the finish line, just like it is
your cousin's job to cover you!" With a flourish, he combs the mud from his hair, snorting, "I
swear I've never seen such farcery! A hooker blocking a blind meant for the lock!"

"And finally," he adds, squaring his shoulders and looking them both in the eye, "The reason we
dragged you onboard was because of your statures. You're taller than most guys on the other team
and with more bulk to boot! But that doesn't mean jack if you can't jump. Your legs are weak as
hell, which is why you -- " he points at Jonathan, "Can't catch up to the other team's hooker and
why you -- " he points at Dio, "Kept losing the scrum."

He gives them a couple seconds for the information sink in.

"Understand?"

"Yes sir!"

"Work on that then, and maybe we'll take you off the bench next season."

The dramatic exit Kensington had been planning on is rudely interrupted when both fathers
descend upon them. Jonathan fervently apologizes, first to the Viscount and then to his classmates,
for his poor performance while Wei and Pyrce try to egg Dio on. The night ends with both sets of
coursemates being invited to dine at Duke Kensington's lodge. Surprisingly, they do not talk of the
game, except to say that the Victorians' guards would be lowered come spring, and instead occupy
themselves with current affairs. There's a toast to Wei's efforts regarding the Yellow River Flood as
well as Nuttall's recent publication. They discover the Duke's younger son -- the Kensington who
had been the Shoulder to Dio's Head -- is studying music at the conservatory in Vienna.

"We'll get revenge," Jonathan promises, when they're filing out of the Duke's home.

"You better," Kensington sniffs, "I don't want to leave the team in Chester's hands."

"Now before wishing you all a Merry Christmas," Pyrce begins, "Need I remind you of the
bargain?"

Wei and Nuttall groan.
"Sure thing," Jonathan nods, "We'll come cheer for one of your games."

"Rowing or golf, really?" Nuttall sighs, "We'll be there for hours!"

"Hey, at least you'll be cheering for the winning team!"

"Put a sock in it, Pyrce."

The Monday after the match marks the first snowfall of the year and with it, the end of the first term. Murray and Pyrce are wintering with relatives; Wei and Nuttall will be staying in London. Mr. Joestar revealed over the dinner on Saturday that Dio and Jonathan had been specially requested to celebrate at the Marchioness of Lansbury's Christmas Eve gala. They are allowed to stay two extra weeks in London but no more than that.

In response to Kensington's suggestions-come-demands, both of them have altered their schedules to squeeze in more training. At seven in the morning, Jonathan is out the front door, sprinting laps around Fitzroy Square. His tracks are oftentimes the first thing to disturb the snow. Dio joins him an hour later, sometimes two. Rather than running, he practices vaulting over the garden fence. Twenty times with the left leg leading; twenty times with the right.

When the carriage arrives to take them back to the manor, they're sweaty and sore and on the edge of illness. Jonathan ends up getting sick during the ride, heaving out the window and onto the side of the road, and Dio (suffering from a cough and sore throat) is sickened further by the smell. The day-long carriage ride ends up taking three and by the time they stumble out of the cart and into the manor, Jonathan is once more the picture of health while Dio wants nothing more than to sleep on a real bed.

Mr. Joestar is standing at the entrance waiting for their return. When he wraps them both in a hug, Jonathan realizes how close he is to surpassing his father in height. Such wistful thoughts are pushed from his mind however, when he sees the visitor seated in the lobby.

"Cross!" he bellows, dashing over to the older boy. "Cross, how long has it been!"

"Joestar," his old schoolmate replies, grinning back, "Goodness, you've grown into a bear! I thought for sure I would be taller than you again! Ah, and Brando too!" he smiles, tilting his head, "Thank you, Viscount, for letting me wait here. I apologize for my abrupt visit."

"Nonsense," the Viscount tsk's, "Any friend of Jojo and Dio is a welcome guest at our house!"

"You'll stay the night then?" Jonathan asks, tugging Cross towards the guest room, "Surely you can't go back to Oxford at this hour!"

"If it's not too much trouble..." Cross begins, looking at Dio, rather than Jonathan or the Viscount.

Dio snorts, muttering 'do as you please' before arduously climbing the stairs.

Just like his childhood illnesses, his limbs feel heavy and he cannot keep his eyelids open. His legs nearly give out in the march up the stairs and when he's before the four poster bed, he can't even be bothered to disrobe, flopping onto the mattress and crawling under the sheets. It is times like this that he can hate his cousin; of course Jonathan would be sick in the carriage for three miserable days; of course Jonathan would give him his cold and not even notice it. Of course Jonathan would prefer someone else's company at the drop of a hat.
Exhaustion makes him sleep through the dinner bell and the next time he wakes, it is morning already. Someone has pulled his socks and tie off (or perhaps he did it himself at night) and there's a bowl of porridge and a kettle of tea on the bedside table. Strewn around the floor are telltale signs of Jonathan's brand of care, once-warm towels, ratty quilts, and children's bedtime stories.

With effort, he propels himself up and into the washroom, brushing his teeth and washing his face. He moves the dining tray to the writing table, eating the honey-saturated concoction. Jonathan had always had a sweet tooth, he knows. Despite the sweetness of both porridge and tea, he's feeling remarkably better after finishing both, able to get up without wincing. A glance at the clock reveals it to be a little past ten; a glance at the window reveals another round of light snowfall.

Sure enough, when he pulls back the curtains, he catches Jonathan and Cross galloping across the snowscape.

Against his nature, a chuckle escapes his lips. Leave it to Jonathan, he thinks, to saddle up horses at the first opportunity.

- 

Cross sits down in the stables after untacking the horses. His face is flushed with giddy exertion and Jonathan is in a similar state.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Jonathan asks, unhooking a brush to comb his mare's mane.

"More than a year, I think," Cross agrees. "How time flies! Tell me, do you remember Chichester?"

"How could I forget?" Jonathan laughs, joined by the mare's nicker, "I was so happy you know? To meet someone who liked to ride, I mean. Dio needs to be dragged to the pastures... I had to bribe him to go to the stables down in Kent!"

"It sounds like you're having a good time in London."

"Oh, the best! It's wonderful to be in an archaeology department. Have you heard of Mr. Petrie? Well, he's revolutionized the field. He comes to give lectures every now and then. And one of my coursemates has published papers!" he beams, motioning to his friend, "And what of you? Do you like Oxford?"

"Quite," Cross admits, quirking his lips, "Though they're a bit stuffy at times."

Jonathan prattles on about his studies and coursemates and the joy of rugby before promptly dropping the brush.

He freezes up momentarily, unable to believe his ears.

"What?"

"I'm getting married," Cross repeats. "Well, in the summer. In Spain. And I was wondering... well, if you would be one of my groomsmen. Clare will be the best man, of course, but I need you there to make sure Webb and Wilcox don't glue everyone to their seats."

Jonathan's face splits into a smile and he crosses the threshold in a fell swoop, heartily throwing his arms around the other man.

"Of course I would! It would be my honor! Oh Cross, I can't believe you're getting married!"
"Hush, Joestar," Cross huffs, more than slightly red, "You're starting to sound like my mother. Anyways, we're still in the midst of planning. Well, Elizabeth's family is doing most of it, but I'll -- " his breath catches here and he hugs Jonathan, "Thank you, Joestar. Thank you so much. I was worried you'd say no. That I'd have to ask one of my coursemates to reign in Webb and Wilcox."

Jonathan is as unable to keep a secret as ever, practically belting out the engagement over the dinner table. Dio chokes on his wine but is quick to offer congratulations; Mr. Joestar gives another toast. Talk of families and matches and transport to Spain (apparently it was faster to sail over the channel then continue the journey via carriage) follow after and when Cross leaves after supper with the understandable excuse of needing to spend Christmas with his fiancée, Jonathan gets a little teary-eyed.

He doesn't have time to dwell on it however, as the Marchioness of Lansbury's gala is fast approaching. Mr. Joestar insists on a new set of suits and so, the tailor is called for. Come the eve of Christmas Eve (for it had suddenly become fashionable to have balls before Christmas day and not after) and the two of them are rocking along in yet another carriage. The Viscount has stuck to tradition, making the journey to the Earl of Willowby's estate once more.

"I can't believe it," Jonathan says, not for the first time.

"What's there to disbelieve?" Dio asks, readjusting his cufflinks.

"Well, just think of it. One of our schoolmates -- Cross! Married!" Jonathan sighs, cupping his cheeks.

"Oh stop that," his cousin interrupts, "You look ridiculous."

"Donagan is going to be the best man," Jonathan continues, and he sounds like a small child speaking of brides.

"That's no surprise."

"Dio," Jonathan addresses, throwing subtlety out the window, "When you get married, I'll be your best man, right?"

Dio opens his mouth, closes it, and then flashes a quick smile.

"Of course Jojo. I wouldn't have anyone else." And then, seeing Jonathan's grin, he quickly adds, "But don't count on my getting married anytime soon. I don't have the time for romance."

"Oh I don't know Dio," Jonathan teases again, "Aphrodite cares little for time."

"Brat."
With other mad schemes of railroads and steams

The Christmas Eve gala ends as expected with Jonathan standing in the corner and making small talk with already-engaged peers from Oxford and Cambridge and Dio taking the lion's share of dances. With much whining and moaning from the hostess herself, he consents to dancing with the Marchioness' eldest daughter a second time, but no more than that. Stalking out into the gardens for a breath of fresh air, he finds his younger cousin staring dolefully at the moon.

"People will talk," he warns, not for the first time.

"I'm sure they have more interesting things to talk about," Jonathan replies.

"Some of their mothers are most insistent," Dio continues, "What would you have me say?"

"The truth." Jonathan looks at him then, and there's something fierce in his gaze. "I'm not ashamed. Father never married anyone else; I plan to do the same."

Something heavy grows in Dio's throat then. When he swallows, it sinks to his chest.

"I understand," he lies, lightly touching Jonathan's shoulder. "I'll see you inside."

- Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's Eve, and Dio's twentieth birthday all fly by and soon enough, the two of them are loaded up in the carriage with sweets and sweetmeats to share with their coursemates in London. Though the snow is already beginning to melt around the Joestar manor, the London streets still need to be salted. Classes recommence the Monday after their arrival and Jonathan and his coursemates hear (via Dio and the grapevine) that the first sporting event of the year will be a rowing competition between Hugh Hudson, Queen Mary, and Birkbeck along the River Thames.

Come the first Saturday of the new term, the five of them dutifully pile into a carriage bound for Chiswick called for by the man of the hour himself. As per etiquette, the men and women seat themselves on opposite ends of the cart, resulting in Wei being squashed between Jonathan and Dio.

"The weather looks alright," Murray remarks, peering out the window.

"At least it's not raining," Nuttall agrees.

"Do you know anyone on the opposite team, Madame Nuttall?"

"I don't believe so, no. Why?"

"Well, it seemed like you knew some of the women from the Victorian School."

"Oh, well, yes." She straightens out her gloves then, casually glancing out the window. "Their charter doesn't allow for proper art classes, so they come take them at the Slade."

"How are you capable of conversation at this ungodly hour?" Wei grumbles, still wedged between the dozing cousins.

"Ungodly hour?" Nuttall laughs, "Mr. Wei, you underestimate us. Archaeologists are meant to work from dawn to dusk!"
"And yet your coursemate is sleeping."

"Let him," Murray smiles, resting cheek against palm, "He's just a child. Well, they both are."

"Mr. Pyrce is most thoughtful," Nuttall murmurs as the carriage pulls up to the riverbank, "Though he has poor taste in sports."

"Hear, hear," Wei laughs, elbowing first Dio and then Jonathan, "Hey, Brando. Joestar. Wake up. We've arrived."

According to the instructions from the driver, the boats would be ferried in from the west, with the first prow past the finish line declared the winner. The competitors and spectators would then be invited to dine at the boathouse though, unfortunately, they had a gentlemen-only policy. Despite the four dozen or so other spectators, there weren't enough women to require a separate section, though Jonathan of course managed to acquire chairs for the ladies.

"Well," Nuttall starts, after they had stared at the riverbank for five minutes, "I must say rugby is much more thrilling."

"A bit too thrilling," Murray shudders, remembering her fellow spectators, "No, I find this most enjoyable."

"What do you think, Mr. Joestar -- " Nuttall is about to ask. She turns back only to find the three men sleeping while standing upright. "Miss Murray," she whispers, "Look."

The two women share a quiet giggle at their fellow classmates.

"I can see it already," the elder narrates, "Pyrce is moments away from the finishing line..."

"And none of us see him win!"

"Ah, that's much too sad," she sighs, reaching out to lightly tug Jonathan's sleeve, "Mr. Joestar!"

"Wha -- buh -- "

"My apologies, but you were sleeping."

"Oh, um," Jonathan stammers something incomprehensible, waking Dio and Wei in the process, "I'm sorry." He rubs at his eyes, poorly covering up a yawn, "We were practicing rugby yesterday so I'm a little tired from that."

"I still think it's too early to be awake, to say nothing of rowing," Wei sniffs.

"D'you think it'll be much longer?"

"At this rate, the snow might thaw before they get here..."

"Come now," Nuttall berates, "We should have some school spirit! Look, the students from Queen Mary are practicing their song. We might as well follow their lead."

Her fellow students exchange disbelieving looks.

"Here?" Murray echoes.

"Now?" Wei adds.
"Yes, here and now! That way, when Pyrce rows by the bend he can hear the Hugh Hudson anthem and not, say, Birkbeck's." Without further ado, she stands up, gesturing for Murray to do the same, and raises one hand, "And a one, and a two, and a --"

"Yeeeee dons and and ye doctors -- "

"Ye provosts and proctors -- "

"Who are made to..."

"No, paid to."

"No, I'm pretty sure it's made to."

"Mo-no-po-lize know-ledge!"

"Mr. Wei, please stop warbling."

"I'm not!"

"I think that's me, sorry!"

"Oh. Sorry."

"Come make opposition,"

"By voice and petition,"

"To the radical infidel college!"

And then, silence.

"I don't know the rest," Murray confesses, hanging her head.

"Neither do I."

"I didn't even memorize the first verse," Dio shrugs.

"What? Really?" Jonathan stares wide-eyed, "But it's -- 'Chuck-farthing advances the doctrine of chances'!"

"No, no," Nuttall interrupts, "That's much later."

"Oh." He pauses, racking his brain, "What about: 'Ye halls on whose die-is the dawn of...'? "

"That's even later!" she groans, rubbing at her temples, "It's: 'Come put forth your powers in aid of the Towers / which boast of their' -- "

"Bishops and martyrs!"

"Have you any idea what this means?" Wei asks the other non-singing spectators.

"Not a word," Dio replies.

"It's just a rhyming song," Murray shrugs, "I don't think it's supposed to have any meaning."

"Alright, alright," Nuttall concludes, clapping her hands, "Since it seems like all of us only know
the first verse, let's sing it the second we see Pyrce 'round the bend."

"Oh!" Jonathan exclaims on-cue, "There he is!"

And indeed, there is Dio and Wei's fellow coursemate, playing coxswain to the Hugh Hudson boat.

"And a one, and a two," Nuttall starts once more, "And a --"

All in all, it is as Pyrce said: they were cheering for the winning team and what a glorious win it was! Thirty minutes and twelve seconds, a whole ten lengths in front of Queen Mary and thirteen before Birkbeck. The Hugh Hudson boat crosses the finish line right as the five of them are belting out the last line, ending at the dramatic juncture of "college". Pyrce is laughing, whooping, hollering over the next line of verse, before the oarsmen push the boat ashore and throw him into the river.

It's a time-honored tradition, their fellow students explain to them as Jonathan and Dio hastily fish their friend out, for the coxswain of the winning team to be thrown into the water.

"That was marvelous!" Murray exclaims.

"Capital work," Wei agrees, throwing a blanket over Pyrce's shoulders.

"Congratulations!"

"Congratulations indeed!"

"Thank you, thank you," Pyrce gloats, bowing this way and that, "And thank you for coming to see my triumph! Garçon! Fetch my friends some cocoa and crumpets! And beer for the boys and juice for the girls!"

As women (and non-whites) are not permitted inside the clubhouse, Pyrce insists on bringing the celebration outside. The other members of the Rowing Society pitch in to buy drinks for the other spectators, even those on the losing teams. They chatter and sing and dance and cheer well into noon and when the six of them pile back into the carriage (with Pyrce mostly dried out), the remaining students give them a standing ovation.

"Alright!" Jonathan thoroughly enthuses when they're bounding back to London, "Wait and see, Pyrce! Dio and I have improved tremendously since last November! As soon as the snow thaws, we'll show you a good fight!"

"That's the spirit!"

- 

When the snow has fully melted and the leaves are beginning to sprout, Jonathan makes good on his promise. Both Dio and himself are accepted back on the rugby union, though they've been demoted to left and right flanker respectively, and they play stupendously in the first match of the 1888 season against the Royal Polytechnics. They don't lose a single turnover (though the term is lost on their coursemates) and the Hugh Hudson team wins by a respectable seven points.

"I knew you had it in you!" Kensington gloats, grinning from ear to ear. "Now what do you say you grab your mates and lasses and let's go get ourselves drunk?"

The brouhaha continues for hours after the victory and when the two of them are stumbling back to Fitzroy Square, Jonathan feels like --
"Like I can do anything!" he exuberates, laughing and spinning before careening into the fence. "Ow."

"You can do anything alright," Dio snorts. He tries to offer his hand but ends up having to lean against the railings.

"Thank you for playing rugby with me," Jonathan beams, standing up and pulling his cousin along, "I think we make a great team!"

"Is that so," Dio whistles, slinging an arm over the other and letting himself be helped up the stairs. "It is, it is!" Jonathan trills right before passing out on the couch.

Dio bumbles about the flat, knocking his arms, shoulders, and knees against nearly all the walls. Still, he manages to coordinate his limbs long enough to throw a blanket over Jonathan before pulling off the other man's shoes and socks. They're both covered in muck and grime, literally trekking dirt across the flat. There's dried mud on Jonathan's face and hair, which he sloppily wipes away. Then he stumbles into the bathroom, washing first his hands and then his face, before tumbling into bed as well.

And in the dark, he thinks of the could have been's.

With an air of resignedness he can't remember not feeling, he palms himself underneath his shorts, giving way to fancy again.

The Monday after the first match, Kensington calls for a team meeting not at their usual training spot on Primrose Hill, but in the third story hallway in the medical sciences building.

"Brando! Joestar!" he greets, "Congratulations again for a good show! Keep it up and you'll make hooker and lock back in no time flat!"

Jonathan trades glances with Dio, beaming.

"Now, before we head off to practice today, I want to make you official members of the Hugh Hudson Rugby Union. A mild initiation, if you will." He claps his hands and one of their other teammates, one of the halfbacks, comes out of the broom closet.

"Preparations complete," he announces.

"Thank you Chester," Kensington replies. The two of them share a secret smile.

"What's this about an initiation?" Dio, of course, demands.

"Oh, you'll see soon enough," Kensington titters. "It's a harmless enough surprise, I promise. Now, Joestar, if you will..."

Dio watches the fourth year place a blindfold over Jonathan's eyes. When it's his turn, he stills Kensington's hand.

"I don't need the blindfold."

"Too bad," Kensington retorts, neatly tying the knot, "Didn't Chichester teach you anything? The orders of the Head are absolute!" He chuckles a bit and there's some telltale background shuffling. "Alright," Kensington continues, "In you go Joestar, watch your step, it won't take a -- "
His reassurances are cut short with a banshee-like cry.

"Jojo?!" Dio calls, immediately reaching for his blindfold. His hands are batted away and, while struggling and cursing, he's shoved into the broom closet as well. The anticipation does not last long; both of his earholes are promptly assaulted with something soft and wet and most certainly not human.

"What the -- "

"To our newest members!" Kensington declares as both blindfolds are pulled off and they're treated to the lithograph of a stallion. "May I present gentlemen's Chester and Chester -- welcome to the Chester club!"

"What," Dio repeats, right as Jonathan's eyes light up.

"Oh!" he exclaims, fingering his wet ear canal, "The three time Australian champion, right?"

"Precisely!" Kensington confirms, clapping his hands again, "We took a page from the cricket society here, all of their members go by Mr. Hermit. Well, the rugby union was only established last year and of course Chester is the big name in races now."

"It's really quite handy," one of the other players agrees, "I used to have to think up aliases, but now it's just 'Mr. Chester, at your service'!"

"Doesn't that get confusing...?" Jonathan asks.

"Not at all! Look here: Chester, give me a hand!" The fifth lock stands up, taking the brushes from Kensington. "Go wash these, will you? See? Not confusing at all!"

"What did you put in our ears?" Dio demands, wiggling his little finger this way and that.

"A wet horsehair brush! Chester here thought of the idea. Unfortunately the real Chester is still alive so we can't get hair from him, but apparently these brushes are from one of Hermit's line."

"Wow..." Jonathan breathes, looking up at the lithograph once more.

"Well, that's that," Kensington concludes, wiping his hands and opening the closet door, "Come on, Misters Chester and Chester, let's play rugby!"

-

The month of February passes by in a rugby-filled blur. There is a match every Saturday and they practice Monday through Friday with a break on Wednesday. Not only do they establish the Hugh Hudson team as top seed in the London circuit, but they also play against the Victoria School. Just like Kensington had said, there was little confusion with homogenized naming and in some ways, it was even easier -- knowing only the captain had a name. The Victorians are paid back in full with Dio and Jonathan returning to their initial positions. Between the two of them, they score nearly half of the match's points.

It is inevitable then, that the other shoe drops in the form of Jonathan's grades and attendance. As rugby practice had run during the same hour as both of his elective courses, he had skipped out on nearly a month's worth of lessons. The head of the department had had Words with him but, as Jonathan continued to play truant, eventually notified the Viscount of his son's errant ways. Mr. Joestar proves himself as unflinching as ever, immediately ordering Kensington to pull Jonathan from the team -- another indefinite suspension, this time on account of poor grades.
Jonathan is initially affronted, writing desperately to his father to justify himself. The letter he receives is addressed to a twelve-year-old, not a twenty-year-old, and he is inconsolable the weekend of.

"It's not fair," he cries over dinner, "Why am I the one always being punished? I tried my best! Kensington said I could make up those papers after the spring season!"

Dio wisely keeps quiet. They are different people in the end; while Jonathan will prioritize the team's victory, he has not let his grades slip up. While Jonathan was running laps in the snow, he was seated before the furnace, forever revising. Despite the victories of the rugby team, his marks are still on par with his classmates, though neither Wei nor Pyrce are letting up. Even in Chichester, he thinks, Jonathan was terrible with time management -- always putting off revising until the last minute up until he had Dio breathing down his neck.

"What did I do wrong?" his cousin laments, wiping at his eyes.

"More chicken?" Dio offers in lieu of advice.

"No! I'm not hungry!" he sets down his cutlery and stomps back to his room. The slam of the door followed by the impact against the mattress rattles throughout the flat.

Left alone at the table, Dio thoughtfully chews. There would be more opportunities to play rugby. He doubts Kensington would force Jonathan to quit for good -- the volley between the two of them made up the team's core offense after all. But at the same time, the notion of Jonathan choosing sports over books is an alarming one.

Setting foot in the university library sends a tremor of guilt through him. How many days, no, weeks, had it been? He remembers first year, how he would have gladly lived in the library. But now, when he opens the prints by Oates, Yates, even Catherwood... the thirst to learn more is lost. Desperately, he scans the pages, flipping through the sketches as one might flip through a store catalog.

He recognizes the figures, understands the words, he can even quote and critique the archaeological approaches. But something, something fundamental, is missing.

He's grateful to be pulled from his thoughts with the familiar voices of his coursemates.

"Mr. Joestar?" Murray calls, click-clacking over, "Oh Mr. Joestar, Good morning!"

"Good morning, Miss Murray, Madame Nuttall," Jonathan dutifully replies.

"It's been so long, I feel like we haven't -- " Murray is cut off with the shushing of a librarian.

"Mr. Joestar, a word if you will?" Nuttall asks. Though no words are exchanged, Murray chooses to stay behind, tidying up both tables.

Like a scolded child, Jonathan walks two steps behind, following his older coursemate out the library, past the north cloisters, and onto the first floor terrace. There, she sits them down at one of the many empty tables, rearranging her skirts before leaning back against the chair.

"Mr. Joestar."

"Yes?"
"What's the matter? We haven't seen you in the library since January -- back then we joked you would soon become a permanent fixture." She taps the back of his hand with her closed fan, expression softening, "Tell me what's wrong."

Jonathan tries to hold it in, tries to keep to standards. He knows it's improper, to be confessing his faults to a married woman. Though her tongue is sharp, her expression remains kind and he finds his mouth moving of its own accord. His fears reveal themselves, one after another -- how he is disappointing his father at every occasion, how he thought the title of 'rugby champion' might be more fitting, how his older cousin might be right -- that archaeology was useless and he would never amount to anything.

When he finishes, he finds his gaze has shifted to his hands. Hesitantly, he raises his eyes, and is surprised to find neither pity nor exasperation in her gaze.

"My dear boy," she murmurs, tapping him on the forehead with her fan, "You are overthinking things. Although I have only met your father once, I can reassure you that he desires your happiness, wherever you may find it. While I cannot understand your passion for rugby," and here, she mutters 'accursed bloodsport' under her breath, "I can understand immediate pleasures. There are no easy answers in archaeology, no obvious lines in the field. We make our own questions and wrestle from the available evidence, our best guesses."

"My husband," she continues, "Started off as a linguist. A translator, actually. He studied languages for years, still picks them up like pennies. But he fell in love with a different field. Ours, of course. Perhaps you will be the same, perhaps this is only a stepping stone. But a man like you ought to take to the books. Your brains would be wasted out there with the other jockeys."

"There was a girl I wanted to marry," Jonathan echoes, looking over and away, "But she died. I do not think I would marry another." He heaves a sigh, closing his eyes, "... I wanted a lifelong passion regardless. At least, I think that's what I want." He laughs, blinking his eyes to avert his gaze, "It's silly, I know. I haven't the mind for the subject."

"What's silly about that?" Nuttall demands. "It's no different from myself, or Alphonse, or, I suspect, your cousin and his coursemates. People have different callings, it'd be foolish to think otherwise, but we all need things to pursue. Mr. Joestar, if your wants do not coincide with reality, work harder. And if you want something else altogether, chase after it. As for me," she stands, readjusting her hat and hem, "There are codices that need transcribing."

As is her way, Zelia Nuttall comes and goes in a flurry, leaving Jonathan alone on the terrace.

He stares at his empty palms for a while longer before looking up to the overcast sky. Then he goes back into the library and redoubles his efforts. Somewhere in the hours of the early evening, he finds his interests reinvigorated. The sketch of a carving of Aztec human sacrifices is a catalyst of sorts, reigniting his curiosities. Because there, albeit tilted to the side and certainly not in the focus of the carving, is a Stone Mask, nearly identical to his mother's heirloom.

With trembling hands, he marks down the title and page number, scribbling additional notes regarding the whereabouts of the carving. He nearly stumbles into Nuttall on his way back home.

"My!" she remarks, smiling winsomely under the streetlights, "You're looking a lot better."

"Thank you," he wholeheartedly says, "Thank you so much. What you said -- it was what I needed to hear. I'm not going to drop out, of either Hugh Hudson or this course. I think -- well, I'll have to ask the lecturer of course -- but I think I've found my dissertation topic."
"Oh Joestar," she sighs, clasping her hands, "That's wonderful, congratulations!"

"Thank you, again. I know you don't benefit from our classes together but if there's anything I can do to help -- "

He stops, catching the dangerous glint in her eyes.

"Well," she starts, "Now that you mention it..."

"Anything," Jonathan swears, "anything."
Of tombstones and places for slaughter!

Dio initially plans on giving Jonathan a week to sulk before pushing him into the library. Jonathan proves he's grown up somewhat by dashing up the stairs a mere two days after his second athletic suspension, clearly in good spirits.

"Dio!" he gasps, uncharacteristically out of breath, "Dio, do you believe in ghosts?"

"Help me peel the carrots," Dio primly replies, gesturing to the neglected vegetables, "And what were you doing out so late?"

"It's not that late!" He glances at the clock, only to reveal it being half past nine, "Oh, well. I was reading in the library and lost track of time. Miss Murray and Madame Nuttall were there as well, and Madame Nuttall was most helpful and..." he washes his hands and rolls up his sleeves, getting to work on the vegetables, "That's right! So, ghosts. Do you believe in them?"

"You mean the Holy Ghost?" Dio asks, not taking his eyes off of the lamb.

"No, I mean... well, spirits who are doomed to wander the earth forever." He pauses, "D'you think I should add the carrots now?"

"Yes. Salt and pepper too, if you will." Dio hands him the spatula, walking over to set the table. "And no, I don't. It doesn't make sense."

"How so?"

"Don't add so much salt."

"I'm not!" Jonathan insists. And then, when Dio is laying out the cutlery, he gives the salt pot three vehement shakes. Then he returns both salt and pepper to pantry before pulling out the half-eaten loaf of bread. He busies himself with cutting and buttering said bread while Dio moves the meat and vegetables from pan to plate. There's leftover soup on the hob and the landlady had given them another sack of apricots.

"So," Jonathan starts as they're digging in, "What do you mean by it doesn't make sense?"

"Jojo," Dio chastises, wiping breadcrumbs from his face.

"Oh. Sorry." Jonathan chews, swallows, and downs his glass of water.

"The logistics of it are nonsensical," Dio elaborates, "If there is heaven and hell, who would be chosen to remain? If ghosts did exist, then there would be far too many of them. Imagine all the dead continually roaming the earth." He shakes his head, adding emphatically, "No, ghosts are to spook children; people are better off being scared of each other."

"I see."

They are quiet for a while, concentrating on eating. The Cookbook for the Modern Family was right about one thing: making edible food was really a matter of practice. Sure, the meat was still sometimes singed and certainly, Jonathan's dependence on cholestrol (and grease and sugar) for flavoring was as notable as ever, but they reliably ate in more often than not and they were both capable of single-handedly making a simple supper on the rare evenings they ate separately.
"What prompted this?" Dio finally asks, after they've finished the mains and moved on to fruits.

"Oh, well, I was really thankful for Madame Nuttall's encouragement so..." he trails off to clumsily pick off the apricot skin, "I said I was in her debt."

"Here, give me that. Just take mine," Jonathan had somehow managed to claw off more skin than meat. "And this is related to ghosts how?"

"Well Miss Murray is interested in the occult," his cousin explains, veering off on another tangent, "Apparently there's an abandoned mansion nearby that she's gotten permission to visit. Of course, Madame Nuttall insisted on coming with her and she asked if I would be willing to chaperone them." He takes a bite of the fruit, licking his lips, before concluding, "I told her yes. I don't know if I believe in ghosts or not, but I don't think two women should stay the night alone."

"Wait. You plan to sleep there?"

"I don't think so. Madame Nuttall said Miss Murray wanted a séance."

"And she..." Dio pauses, still in disbelief, "She believes in them?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask. Well," he shrugs, "I think you're right. If people did end up like ghosts, it'd be far too lonely. I can't imagine enjoying it."

"When is this?"

"Ah, um..." he checks the smudged writing on the back of his hand, "The thirteenth. Monday, I think."

"Tuesday, actually." He finishes peeling another apricot, handing it to Jonathan, before adding: "I don't like it. The thought of you three staying a night."

"Oh don't worry," Jonathan reassures, "Madame Nuttall said there would be separate rooms. I won't even be there for the séance!"

"That's not what I'm worried about." This much, Dio can admit. He purses his lips, thinking back to his years in London. An abandoned house was a goldmine for vagrants. Oftentimes, they managed to conceal themselves from even the inspectors. He can't reveal this to Jonathan however, as that would mean confessing to having lived in less-than-stellar conditions.

"Come now, Dio," Jonathan playfully goads, "I'm much stronger than before. Between the training at Chichester and the practices we've had for rugby, I'm sure I can handle one night without sleep!"

"Where is this place, even?" Dio demands. He hedges his bets on it being too far to commute.

"Oh, quite close apparently. Madame Nuttall said it would be less than an hour by coach."

"Do you know the name of the district?"

"Well, that is..." Jonathan squints at smudged letters, "Magbair...?"

"Mayfair," Pyrce confirms, snapping his fingers. "That abandoned house on Berkeley Square."

"Never heard of it," Wei shrugs.
"What! Never?! But it's -- "

"Ahem," the lecturer interrupts, rapping on the podium, "Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of us, Mr. Pyrce?" 

"Nothing at all," Pyrce grins, ducking his head and pretending to write. Well, he does actually write something, loudly ripping the scrap sheet off and passing it to Dio.

'What's with the sudden interest?' the note reads. Dio takes a deep breath and ignores it. He and Wei can agree on one thing: Pyrce was absolutely infuriating at times. It wasn't even how he would not shut up, or that he managed to get all three of them kicked out of five lectures, but how he did all that and still managed to beat them every other time. Whenever they were actually called on to speak, Pyrce would inevitably be leading the public cases -- mock trials which were, at the end of it, all that really mattered.

As soon as the lecture is finished, Pyrce is up on his feet.

"So if you don't know of it, why ask about it?"

"I didn't know you had an interest in such things," Wei muses.

"I used to see ghosts all the time back in Scotland," Pyrce laughs, "Well, I don't see them much anymore. But everyone knows of Mr. Myers' old place. I hear even the beggars won't step foot into that place."

Dio practically choke on a laugh. "I doubt it," he snorts.

Come Tuesday and Pyrce has managed to convince both Dio and Wei that they needed to go along, that it was their duty as British gentlemen to safely see the ladies (and Jonathan) through the night. And so it was that the six of them were packed yet again into another carriage with Dio and Pyrce skipping out on practice to come along. Nuttall and Murray have ample room; their skirts don't even touch! The men, on the other hand, are packed shoulder-to-shoulder and then some.

"At least it's a short ride!" Pyrce grins when they're clampering out of the cart.

"At least you're not wet," Dio sniffs.

"Hey! I told you, we were just following tradition!"

"You young'uns sure this is the place?" the coachman asks, cautiously looking at the worn-down line of townhouses. The unsettling atmosphere is further enhanced by the extended shadows, a result of the quickly-setting sun.

"Residence number fifty, yes, this is it." Nuttall gives the driver a generous tip, 'to make sure he comes to pick us up,' she adds.

"Well," Murray begins, pulling out a key, "I suppose we should go in."

"Normally, I'd say ladies first, but..." Pyrce plucks the key from her hands and motions to the other men, "Brando and I will take the lead; Joestar and Wei, you two hang in the back."

"Is this really necessary?"

"Better safe than sorry."
"C'mon, Brando," Pyrce urges, unlocking the door. It opens with a creak, revealing a musky smell. The stairs zig-zag, cutting through the ground floor, and there are holes and gaps in the steps. Despite Dio's suspicions, the place had clearly been empty for a long time. A thick layer of dust has settled over everything, so much so that Jonathan, Murray, and Wei are coughing with each step. Still, he thinks, double-checking that the door was locked, it's best that no one had been in the house.

"Here," Nuttall says, offering some scarves from her handbag, "Tie this around your nose and mouth."

"Should we go up?" Pyrce asks, pointing to the stairs.

"Yes, please!" Murray replies.

"Watch your step."

"Ooh, that creaks."

"Well, the construction is quite solid at least."

"Mmm, it's just fallen into disrepair."

With deliberate slowness they made their way through the house. Between Pyrce and Murray, every door and closet and drawer on the first two floors were examined. By the time they reached the third and final floor, everyone was clutching tight onto a candlestick.

"Is this what you're interested in?" Nuttall asks, pointing to a series of paintings overlooking the third floor balcony. With her handkerchief, she wipes at the dust-covered face, revealing an old prime minister. "Ah. It's one of Canning's portraits."

"No," Murray answers, "Not him." She passes Dio and Pyrce then, continuing down the hall. "One... two... three...." she stops at the end of the hallway, trying the door on the left.

"What's the matter?" Nuttall asks.

"It's locked."

"This is an old lock," Wei mutters upon closer examination. "I could probably pick it."

"I'm not even surprised," Pyrce sighs, "Well, go on then, open it!"

"Is it really necessary?" Wei presses.

"We won't tell," Murray promises.

"Well, alright then." He passes his candlestick to Pyrce before pulling out a set of locksmith tools, taking out two thin silver pins. So, Dio thinks, remembering their initial meeting, that's what his coursemate had meant by 'similar proclivities'. They watch with baited breath as, after a couple minutes of fiddling, the lock gives a satisfying turn.

"Nice!" Pyrce cheers.

"You're a natural!"

"Open it, open it!"
Murray does the honors. The door opens with a predictable creak as the light of her candlestick reveals a completely sealed room. The windows are boarded up, sandbags had been stuffed underneath the doorframe, and the wardrobe is firmly shut. The others understandably hang back, while Murray ventures further alone. At the farthest wall, she suddenly stoops down, running her fingertips along the peeling wallpaper.

"What's the matter?"

"Did you see something?"

"This is it," she replies, motioning for them to come over, "See this hole here?" She points at a barely-recognizable indent, "It's a bullet hole. Lord Lyttleton fired the shot, I suspect."

"Is that why this room was boarded up?" Jonathan asks, warily looking about, "Because someone was shot?"

"No," Murray corrects, "The room was boarded up because nothing was shot."

"There are two theories to that," Pyrce replies, displaying his own knowledge of the occult, "Either it was a figment of his imagination or... or he saw something that couldn't be hit."

"Don't say it like that Mr. Pyrce," Murray scolds, "We're near-certain it was the former. Lord Lyttleton had quite an active imagination, after all."

"Oh? Is that what you think?" the law student counters, "Then what about the Penelope sailors? They all swore they saw someone else in the house. Or Mr. Myers? What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Murray admits, "But I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for these things. That's why I'm -- " She pauses, standing up to shine the candle towards the roof.

"What was that?" Wei demands.

"I sounded like a howl."

"Or a moan."

"Maybe it's the trees?" Jonathan suggests.

"Trees don't sound like -- " Pyrce breaks off as the noise repeats itself, "That." He fumbles to pull his cross out,"...do they?"

"Let's make our way downstairs," Nuttall calmly requests, pulling out her pocketwatch. It was barely past eleven. "It's no good if we're already spooked at this hour."

They share some nervous laughs and exchange a couple words of false bravado before unanimously agreeing. As one huddled mass they make their way out the room, down the hallway, and back down the stairs. Despite his attempts at even breathing, Jonathan finds himself jumping at every creak. When they're halfway past the first floor, they hear the same noise.

"Doesn't it sound louder?" Pyrce hisses.

"You're imagining things," Nuttall reassures.

"I wish I were!"

Jonathan does not know who starts, only that they're all desperately sprinting for the last couple
steps. Dio and Wei have snuffed out their candles; Pyrce is desperately shuffling through his pockets. There's the sound of his cross clattering to the floor as they slam against the door. In the shaking, shivering lights, he swears he can see a seventh person.

"It's nothing, it's nothing, it's nothing," he fervently chants.

"The key! Where is the key?!"

"I don't know!"

"We need to get out now!"

"You opened it!"

"I must have -- it's probably back --"

"Don't you dare!"

Dio takes charge then, tossing his unlit candlestick to the side. With a grunt, he throws himself against the door. Jonathan and Pyrce soon follow suit. It takes four or five solid poundings before the three of them manage to force it off of its hinges. As Dio is the last one to make contact, he stumbles forward, falling hard against the frame.

"Dio!" Jonathan shouts, bodily yanking him up while the others dashed out, "Are you alright?!"

"Fine," he snaps. He tries to dust himself off but ends up wincing.

"Christ," Pyrce swears, taking his candlestick back from Wei, "Brando, you're bleeding."

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Pyrce and Wei sprint to the other side of the square, hollering at the nearest inhabited flat to ring for an ambulance. The emblem of St. John's pulls up soon enough; as the coach only has room for one additional passenger, Jonathan is the natural choice. Murray apologizes profusely for organizing the fiasco in the first place; Jonathan -- though slightly hysterical himself -- nonetheless finds the goodwill to absolve her of guilt. The other four promise to catch the first carriage possible -- indeed, they are barrelling into the hospital's waiting ward minutes after Dio had been wheeled in.

In addition to cuts and bruises, Dio had dislocated his shoulder. Jonathan and Pyrce were better off, with only bruises to show for their efforts. The hospital staff give them an earful for hanging about the abandoned house in the first place. At some point, Jonathan demands to see to his cousin only for the nurse to firmly insist that he wait. After a truly sleepless night, the doctor authorizes Dio's discharge, noting that the afflicted shoulder should be kept in a sling for at least two weeks and the patient should refrain from strenuous activity for another month.

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The next morning, Jonathan finds himself pacing anxiously in the hallway of the medical sciences building.

"Chester!" Kensington greets, "How is London's best fourth lock doing?"

"Fine, fine," Jonathan replies, awkwardly scratching his neck, before forgoing small talk. "Um, I came to say that Dio -- er, Mr. Chester the hooker -- won't be able to play for a month."
"What!" the captain blanches, "First you and now him? What's wrong with him?! Last I checked, he had stellar marks!"

"Uhhh..." Jonathan intelligently quibbles.

"A dislocated shoulder?" the senior undergraduate lecturer for the law department repeats, propping up his glasses. "Do you have a doctor's notice, Mister...?"

"Joestar. Jonathan Joestar. I'm Dio's -- Mr. Brando's -- adopted brother, Sir." Jonathan scrounges around his briefcase, pulling out the doctor's papers.

"I see..." Dr. Merriweather sniffs, squinting at the chicken scratch. "And you're a student at Hugh Hudson too?"

"Yes sir. The archaeology department."

"An aspiring archaeologist, eh?" the lecturer raises an eyebrow, looking Jonathan up and down. "Well, if it suits you." He pulls out Dio's student file, adding some scribbles to bottom margin before returning the papers to Jonathan. "Mr. Brando will be excused from his lectures for two weeks. If he requires an additional extension, you'll need another doctor's note."

"Thank you sir!" Jonathan beams, returning the papers and putting on his hat.

"Best of luck with your archaeological endeavors, Mr. Joestar," the old man adds.

"Thank you!"

After his lectures, Jonathan makes a beeline for the flat, loaded down with flowers from the ladies and chocolates (and notes) from the men. He takes the stairs two at time, throwing open two sets of doors only to find his cousin was still sleeping. The doctor had ordered a medium dose of laudanum, to be consumed orally for the first two weeks. The resettling of muscle and bone would be unbearable otherwise, the man had noted.

He breaths a sigh of relief then, straightening the sheets and rearranging the pillows. He then goes downstairs to ask the landlady for a flower vase, arranging the flowers accordingly. He sets them, along with the chocolates and notes, by the bedside table before preparing porridge and stew on the hob. While both meals are simmering, he cracks open his archaeology journal and continues researching his dissertation. Kensington had let him keep the pseudonym only wth the condition that Jonathan write "the best archaeology paper the university has published" so that he could rejoin the team for the final fall session.

At a quarter to seven, Dio wakes with a groan.

"Dio!" Jonathan exclaims, quickly sprinting over, "Dio, how are you?" he touches the other man's forehead, grabbing a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Alright," his cousin insists, throwing off the sheets with his good hand.

"Wait! Don't get up! Whatever you want, I can get it for you!"

"...Bathroom."
"Oh."

It's alarming to see Dio stand up and then immediately sit down. He takes a couple deep breaths before pushing himself upright, managing a whole four steps before mixing left with right and leaning against the wall for support.

"Dio...!"

"I'm fine," his older cousin repeats, pushing himself up again.

"Let me help you there at least," Jonathan offers. Dio bats his hand away with a snarl. Jonathan forgoes seniority then, forcing Dio's good arm around his shoulder while ignoring his cousin's outraged squawks. Step by step, he guides his cousin to the bathroom. Dio thanks him by slamming the door in his face.

In his laudanum-addled haze, Dio thinks Jonathan to be much like a dog. When he opens the door again, feeling noticeably better after having washed up, dominant arm in a sling notwithstanding, his change in demeanor is apparent enough for Jonathan to notice. And then he finds that train of thought interrupted as he's helped back into bed.

"How long do you plan to keep this up?" he asks while Jonathan brings a serving tray into the room.

"Two weeks. Well, that's what the doctor recommended at least."

"It's bad enough that I slept the day away, you can't expect me to -- "

"Oh, I've already talked with your head lecturer," Jonathan casually replies, blowing the porridge, "He said he'll excuse you for two weeks."

"You what."

"And Kensington too. Well, that was for a month. Doctor's orders."

"Jojo..." Dio growls, gritting his teeth, "I can manage my own affairs."

"Without an arm?" Jonathan puts down the spoon, pursing his lips, "I'm sorry, Dio. It's my fault you dislocated your shoulder. I shouldn't have been worried about ghosts. You were right, there was nothing to be scared of."

"Don't be ridiculous," Dio snorts, reaching for the porridge only to be batted away in turn.

"Father is right, you know. You're always looking out for me," he swallows, expression so damnably earnest, and continues with: "I know I can't help you much. But I'm really very grateful to you and this much, I can help you with, right now."

For a while, Dio just stares.

After what feels like an eternity to Jonathan, his cousin reclines fully against the headboard.

"Very well," he sighs, opening his mouth, "Do your worst."

Dio manages to finish a whole bowl of porridge before downing another tablespoon of pain relief. After returning the dishes to the kitchen, Jonathan soaks a towel in warm water before grabbing Dio's comb and hairbrush.
"Jojo," Dio scowls as Jonathan gently wipes his face, "Though my arm may be in a sling, I am not an invalid."

"But Dio," Jonathan whines, even as he's tossing the towel aside to comb through his cousin's tangled locks, "You did this for me when I was sick."

"We were boys then."

"It's not painful is it?" Jonathan asks, using his fingers to untangle an especially stubborn knot, "You'll tell me if it hurts, right?"

"...It's bearable," Dio replies, fighting to keep his eyes open. It's a lost cause; by the time Jonathan is reading another one of his fairy tales aloud, he can't distinguish the words. It must have a happy ending -- Jonathan only ever read stories with happy endings -- but he can't remember what.

He is vaguely aware of Jonathan finishing the story. He knows his cousin is shifting him to a more comfortable position. He hears a familiar voice ask for a kiss.

Jonathan brushes his lips against Dio's forehead, thinking nothing of it.

It is a familiar gesture from a simple boy, Dio knows.

But even if his heart is hurting, hurting more than any limb, he finds the pain entirely tolerable.

*Dear God*, he woozily prays, *Please let this be forever.*
True to his word, Jonathan frets about like a mother hen for the two weeks Dio needs to wear a
sling. He insists on making all three meals, demands that Dio not trek back down the stairs, and
throws open the windows and brings more flowers and weeds when his cousin is in want of fresh
air. Though his bedside manner is far from professional, there is a painstaking tenderness in his
actions. Somewhat bumbling but as earnest as ever, he manages to cook the meals to Dio's
specifications (which is to say, he stopped drowning everything in salt) and even peels a whole
apple after the first week.

"If you keep this up," Dio warns, eyeing Jonathan's bandaged fingers, "Our positions will soon be
reversed."

"You worry too much," Jonathan replies, carefully measuring out another spoonful of medication,
"Just try to relax. Besides, Miss Murray has sworn off haunted houses."

In the end of March, they return to the hospital where the doctor removes sling and cast, reminding
his patient that excessive physical activity should be avoided for two more weeks at least.

When he returns to class, Merriweather congratulates him on a successful recovery. The lecturer
had been most impressed with his cousin's promptness, Pyrce tells him, for apparently it was most
common in the event of extended absences for the department to be chasing after doctors! Dio
thanks his classmates for their notes and well-wishes while they thank him in turn for breaking
them out of the house.

Jonathan's birthday falls on a school day this year, but because it is his twentieth, the Viscount
travels to London, inviting their coursemates to dine out yet again. He also brings with him a
telegram from Cross: the bride's family has finished the preparations. Dio and Jonathan are invited
to sail from Southampton to Bilbao in three months' time on June 28th. Nuttall is most surprised --
it turns out to be a small world as she and her husband would be summering there come July.
Jonathan promptly agrees to a meeting -- as he giddily tells his father and cousin while they are
walking back to the flat, it was truly incredible, that his classmate was married to the Alphonse
Pinart.

As per tradition, Mr. Joestar leaves them with a heady allowance and an urging to be studious. He
congratulates Dio again for his high marks (not quite top, courtesy of Pyrce's performance in the
mock trials, but certainly deserving of a first) and reiterates how touched and proud he is, that
Jonathan is studying his mother's heirloom. He hugs them both before stepping into the waiting
coach and bidding them goodnight.

"Oh," Jonathan moans, when they finish the six flights of stairs, "I need to sit down."

"Are you alright?" Dio asks, pressing the back of his wrist to his cousin's forehead. Jonathan's
cheeks are quite flushed, though he had only sipped at the wine.

"Yes! Yes, it's just that..." he heaves a sigh before grinning wide, "Well, I can't believe it still.
Cross is really getting married! We're sailing to Spain! Madame Nuttall and Monsieur Pinart are
going to show me the museums! There's so much to be done, I'm a little overwhelmed. Oh, but it's
so exciting, I'm so excited!" He stands up while still smiling and takes both of Dio's hands, "Oh
Dio! Have you ever been abroad? This'll be my first time!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself Jojo," Dio advises, rolling his eyes while allowing the other to drag
him in a little skip-skip-hop, "Take care that your dissertation takes priority."

"Of course!" Jonathan agrees, "Actually, that's what I'm most excited about!"

-Brief bout of ennui notwithstanding, Jonathan is remarkably constant with his passions, holing himself up in a barricade of books from dawn 'till dusk five days a week. When he's not at lectures or seminars or private meetings with his advisor, he's mapping and remapping the intended purpose of human sacrifice and the role the Stone Mask was meant play. Dio sees him for dinner quite consistently, and their groups sometimes pass one another in the hallways, but he is for the most part busy with his own studies.

Even after the initial month of limited activity had passed, he finds his attendance at rugby practice faltering. With the final stretch of time before the practitioner's exam, the lion's share of lectures have been replaced with trips to observe current trials. Most of the rulings took place in London, but the department had ties to the north and south of England as well, leading to frequent weekend trips to neighboring towns. Kensington nearly blows a gasket when Dio admits that he'll be sitting out of the next three games. Thankfully, it seems there are similar concerns across the university teams and whole circuit is placed on hiatus until the next term. This was the problem, the fourth year grumbles, with starting up any new sport: the loss of old blood was often fatal.

The captain cheers up considerably when he finds out Jonathan is not only determined to "write the best archaeology paper the university had ever published" but that he was also continuing his exercises so he would be ready for the next season.

Come early June and all three archaeology students are ready to present a draft of their dissertations. Nuttall is continuing her work on the codices, writing this time on word order and its implications on the spoken language. Murray has been being suitably inspired from their four hours spent in Berkeley Square; her paper is on burial practices in Early Dynastic Egypt. Following the adage of 'ladies first', Jonathan is the last to present. While members of the department -- the senior lecturer in particular -- are quick to point out inconsistencies in methodology and extraneous bits of data, his conclusion of the Stone Mask being a tool in human sacrifice, and subsequently a stepping stone in the prosperity of ancient peoples, is extremely well-received.

"This being your first paper," his advisor continues, "You have the most to revise. But I cannot emphasize enough how solid most of your arguments are. Yes, you'll need to redo a couple paragraphs, tweak the conclusion slightly, maybe include a picture or two, but..." his takes off his spectacles to wink, "This is one of the most promising starts I've seen. Keep up the good work, Mr. Joestar."

"I will!" Jonathan replies, "Thank you so much, Dr. Nottingham!"

He's sprinting out of the office, through the quad, across the square, up the stairs, and into the flat. With a giddy cry, he throws his arms around Dio.

"I take it your dissertation was well received?" Dio asks, quirking his lips.

"Oh, yes!" Jonathan releases him to grab at his hands, light-headedly jumping up and down, "I mean, there's a lot I'll have to revise and they want me to take out the paragraph on child sacrifice entirely because it doesn't support the end conclusion but I did it, Dio! I did it!"

"Congratulations," Dio says, squeezing Jonathan's hands. "And I finally bested Pyrce in a mock
"You did?" Jonathan gasps, embracing him again, "Congratulations!"

"Yes, yes, I was told plenty of that. Go tell Father the good news will you? I'll make a dinner reservation."

"Yes!"

Their second dinner at the Grosvenor is spent with Jonathan chattering away. Cross has sent another telegram saying their groomsman suits would be arriving in the next week and if they could try it on to see if adjustments needed to be made -- Mr. Joestar had provided the measurements (well, he had shipped off some current attire) and the name of the boat had been announced. Webb, Wilcox, and Donagan would be coming of course, and Webb had actually gotten himself a fiancée! Nuttall and Murray have invited them to luncheon tomorrow; they would be going their separate ways soon enough as the archaeology department ended a week early.

"No way!" Pyrce exclaims, "Egypt, really?!"

"With the one and only Flinders Petrie himself," Nuttall preens, "Oh, congratulations Miss Murray, you deserve it!"

"Thank you, thank you so much," Murray murmurs, dipping her head. "I never thought that I could offer anything, much less on an expedition!"

"What about you two?" Jonathan asks, turning to Dio's coursemates.

"Back to China," Wei winces, "My grandfather is thinking of signing me on."

"As a barrister?"

"What else?"

"That's amazing! They use common law there, don't they?" And then, when Wei nods, Pyrce adds, "Then you'll fit right in!"

"What about you, Mr. Pyrce?"

"Oh, I'll be helping around in Scotland," he shrugs, "My eldest sister has given birth so I guess I'm an uncle now!"

The women (and Jonathan) gasp as one, while Wei orders another round of champagne.

"And you two are still going to Spain, yes?" Nuttall smiles, clinking glass.

"Mm."

"Well, I sent a 'gram to Alphonse and he's most interested in seeing your dissertation!" she tilts her head, grinning, "Do bring a copy along, will you? To pique my husband's interest is no small feat." Jonathan splutters, at a loss for words.

"Yes," he manages to choke out, "Yes, I'd be honored."
"And what about you, Brando?" Pyrce elbows his coursemate, "Don't you have good news to share?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dio replies.

"Good news?" Jonathan repeats.

"Come on, either you tell them or I will!" Pyrce threatens in jest.

"It's nothing, really," Dio insists.

"I wouldn't call an offer of employment 'nothing'," Wei snorts.

"What!" Jonathan exclaims, whirling on his cousin, "That's amazing! When? And where?!"

"It was like something out a novel," Pyrce recounts, "We had just finished a mock trial with the first years and a representative from Coward Chance -- "

"Wait," Murray uncharacteristically interrupts, "Coward Chance?"

"Congratulations Mr. Brando," Nuttall applauds, "Even stateside knows of that firm."

"I haven't accepted the offer yet," Dio underscores, keeping an eye on Jonathan.

"What, do you think something better will come up?"

"Better than CC?" Pyrce laughs, "I doubt it!"

Congratulations are said again while flutes are refilled. They make short work of the cakes and sandwiches and promise to meet up at the start of the fall term as well. Nuttall and Jonathan exchange forwarding addresses, making plans for a tour of museums on the northern coastline. Dio is welcome to come along, Nuttall adds, as there was much more to Spain than an assortment of Aztec codices!

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"Wow!" Jonathan repeats as they're walking back, "Coward Chance, really! I can't believe you didn't tell me! Or Father! He'll be ecstatic, I'm sure."

"It's hardly set in stone," Dio argues, "In fact, it's a conditional offer."

"On what?"

"My marks. What else?"

"No worries there," Jonathan laughs, relaxing, "You'll get in for sure!"

- 

Jonathan hacks away at his dissertation for the next couple weeks, leaving Dio to pick up their suits and reassure Mr. Joestar that yes, they were doing well, no, Jonathan was not sick, yes, he was still a single-minded idiot where archaeology was concerned, etc., etc. The carriage Cross offers them turns out to be unnecessary as Mr. Joestar has already arranged for one of the manor's drivers to escort the two of them from London to Southampton.

The SS Berenice ends up being one of Wilcox's ships. Not massive but any means, but with a sleek
"Wow..." Jonathan breathes, setting down his bags to look the steamship up and down.

"Joestar! Brando!" a familiar voice calls from the upper deck, "Come on up!"

"Webb!" Jonathan exclaims. It's like they're schoolchildren again: as soon as they've set their bags down, he grabs on to Dio's wrist, dragging his cousin through the ship's entrance and up the stairs.

"I see you're still thick as thieves," Wilcox remarks.

"Wilcox! Donagan! Cross!" Jonathan greets, "It's been so long!"

"Joestar, Brando," the best man replies, shaking hands with both of them, "I'm glad you could it."

Their old schoolmates have changed considerably and then, not at all. Webb and Wilcox have already pushed Cross into the water (which explained the latter's lack of a shirt) and they were very loudly plotting to steal Donagan's bathing suit. Cross has not changed much since Jonathan saw him last, but as the other three -- well, Donagan has certainly grown into himself. Never quite bulky, he could no longer be called lanky. There was a businessman's swagger to his stride, something which Wilcox would not stop teasing him for. Webb and Wilcox had grown thinner and fatter respectively; Webb had put on some height while Wilcox had gained some muscle. They were still clearly distinguishable but now more similar than not.

"Congratulations on your engagement!" Jonathan immediately says.

As one, the other three make a throat slitting motion.

Jonathan's face falls. "Oh," he lamely tries, "I mean... that is..."

"Don't bother," Webb sniffs, crossing his arms, "I've decided to remain a bachelor forevermore!"

"It was just one girl," Cross soothes, "It's too soon to throw in the towel."

"This coming from Sir Cross of the double digits..." Wilcox laughs.

"It was a misunderstanding!"

"Double digits?" Jonathan asks.

"Oh, Cross didn't tell you?"

"Clare...!"

"The lucky Miss Elizabeth -- "

" -- is fiancée number twelve!"

"Weren't you on number five back in Chichester?" Dio asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh Brando," Cross groans, "Don't you get started too!"

"What of Miss Elizabeth?" Jonathan asks, looking about the ship. "Has she not arrived?"

"Joestar!" Wilcox admonishes, "Don't you know anything?"

"It's terrible luck for the bride and groom to see each other before the wedding."
"My, ah, intended," Cross flushes ever so slightly at the term, "will be arriving on a separate ship with her family."

"Apparently the conditions of this ship would've ruined her dress," Donagan dryly notes.

"Her dress?"

"Her family is half-Spanish. Lovely eyes. Good taste my friend." Webb snaps his fingers, "Butler! My friends have been standing around long enough! Pour them a drink, won't you?"

"Master Wilcox," one of the crewmates calls, clambering updeck, "The captain has reeled in the anchors."

"Set sail at will!" Wilcox commands.

"Thanks again for lending me this ship," Cross grins, "Even if you did push me off of it."

"'Tis nothing for a friend!" Wilcox sniggers, affecting a falsetto, "Is our groom at last reconsidering his choice in best man?"

"Not a chance," Cross laughs, sticking out his tongue. "Let me pop down for a change of clothes and let's play some cards? Brando, Joestar, thanks again for coming. Without you two, I'm sure Clare would lose all his hair, dealing with these two clowns."

"I believe, Mr. Wilcox," Webb starts, inching closer, "Our friend would like to go swimming again."

Fortunately for Cross, the horn blares at that point, signalling their departure from the port. The next three days are spent in hedonistic bliss: between cards, carambole, and current affairs, Webb and Wilcox live up to their reputation as entertainers. Donagan turns the tables on the second day, hiding away their bathing suits before jumping into the netted pool. They cry shenanigans, but not for long, as Cross soon pulls them in by the ankle. They swap raucous stories from university as well -- according to Messieurs Webb and Wilcox, faggotry was even more rampant in the upper divisions than they thought possible!

Jonathan eagerly talks about their classmates, poorly segueing how they (well, he, at least) learned side-by-side with women. Even Donagan is surprised to find Hugh Hudson really did live up to its reputation. Dio grudgingly admits he's been doing fine (if top of the class would be called 'fine') and Jonathan wheedles until he divulges the offer of employment from Coward Chance.

"But it's a conditional offer."

"Based on his marks!"

"Yeah, you'll be a shoe-in," Cross laughs, "Say, Wilcox, isn't your father an investor in that firm?"

"Is he now?" Wilcox shrugs, "You can't expect me to keep up with my parents' ventures -- they've far too many of them!"

"Fair enough. And what about you Joestar, what are your plans for graduation?"

"I've thought of applying to a teaching position," Jonathan admits, scratching his cheek, "But I'll have to see how my dissertation pans out."

"What did I tell you?" Webb preens.
"The Jonathan Joestar Finishing School for Boys!"

"It's the first I've heard of it," Dio notes, mildly surprised.

"Well, I'd like to stay in London -- the library is amazing after all -- but we'll see!"

"Careful there Brando," Wilcox jokes, "At this rate you two will be roommates forever!"

Cross' Grand Spanish Wedding (as dubbed by Webb and Wilcox) takes place on Sunday the first of July. It is a truly grand affair, attended by some two hundred guests and taking up most of the shore of Bilbao. After the double ceremonies (Anglican and Catholic) and the exchanging of vows, Donagan raises his glass to give the best man's toast.

As Cross and Jonathan are teary-eyed by the end of it, it is Dio who has to snatch the pot of adhesive from Wilcox (studiously ignoring the other man's whining), rolling his eyes before surreptitiously returning to the main table.

"Still crying?" he asks, as Jonathan hunches his shoulders, shaking, "I thought you had grown past that."

His cousin says nothing, blowing into his handkerchief.

"Do you still want to be a best man?"

Jonathan looks at him, blinking tearfully. Vehemently, he shakes his head.

Dio rolls his eyes, rubbing the other's back, "If it means so much to you, I swear -- " Here, his breath catches and his hand stills and he hates himself, "Well, you can be one. At my wedding. But you must promise to return the favor, if you ever get the chance."

At this point, Jonathan is clearly giggling into his handkerchief. He sips at the wine, clearing his throat, before looking his cousin in the eye.

"Dio," he urges, "You must not get married for such a silly reason."

"All reasons for marriage are silly," Dio retorts.

Jonathan turns his head to watch the bride and groom finish the dance, putting down his glass to politely clap. Then he turns back towards Dio and leans in close.

"Do you want to know a secret?" he asks, expression laughably serious.

"...What?"

"My shoes are stuck to the floor," Jonathan confesses, collapsing with mirth.

"Well he was the obvious candidate!" Wilcox states. "Since we know he refuses all dances."

"And so we thought -- "

"Why not give our old friend Mr. Joestar a real reason to stay seated?"
"Very funny you two," Donagan grumbles. He turns on Dio, "I thought Cross said you would keep these jokers in-line!"

"I didn't think they'd be working separately," Dio mutters, crossing his arms.

"No, no, it was great!" Jonathan insists, wiggling his sock-covered toes, "Better me than Cross, right?"

"Hmmm," Webb muses.

"About that..." Wilcox chuckles.

"They glued her corset shut?" Nuttall repeats. "How did they even -- "

"Ah," her husband sighs, taking her hand and kissing it, "To be young again!"

"So what happened after that?"

"Haven't the slightest," Dio shrugs, "By the time we learned of it, they had already left for their honeymoon."

They sit in silence for a while. Pinart turns to Dio then.

"So, Mr. Brando, I hear you've plans to be a solicitor?"

"Barrister," he corrects, "But yes."

"Mea culpa," Nuttall apologizes, "I must have mixed them up."

"I should be the one apologizing," Dio groans, rubbing his forehead, "He can't even read Spanish, how is he spending so much time?!"

"No, no, it's a good thing," Pinart insists, "For an old man like myself, it's very refreshing -- you were right about him, my dear, so very enthusiastic."

"Aren't I always?" Nuttall sighs, kissing her husband's cheek. "But really, I'm sorry we're such poor company Mr. Brando. Here, they're selling sorbet over there. What flavor would you like?"

"Anything is fine," Dio replies, squinting in through the museum windows.

"Alright, strawberry it is."

While Nuttall saunters off, both men take out their pocketwatches.

"Four hours?" Pinart asks.

"Four hours and twenty-three minutes."

"The boy has passion, I'll give him that." Pinart hum's and harrumphs, flipping though Jonathan's dissertation again.

"How is it?" Dio asks.

"Oh, well," the older man shrugs, "It's only a first dissertation, but it's really not bad. Not bad at all. There are certain things I'd disagree with of course... my wife will call them nitpickings, but I'm not
even sold on the main idea."

"Ah."

"Still, I'd like to --"

"Here you go!" Nuttall interrupts, passing over three cups of sorbet. "I even got one for your cousin!"

"Thank you," Dio replies, taking both cups, "I doubt he'll be out before it melts."

"Oh, good point," she taps her chin, "Well, I suppose you could eat two. After all, you're a growing young man!"

Jonathan ends up leaving the museum at closing time, having somehow stuffed his briefcase with souvenirs. Although Nuttall and her husband invite them to dinner, they are unable to accept the invitation as Wilcox is intent on beating Cross which means they need to be back on the ship in order to set sail at daybreak.

"See you in September!" Jonathan calls, waving enthusiastically.

"Best of luck with your dissertation!" Nuttall shouts back.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," Jonathan adds, "I thought for sure the three of you would leave without me!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Dio replies, "We were only meeting on your account."

"But wasn't it fascinating?" his cousin insists, practically skipping up the gangway, "I know you didn't stay for long, but didn't you see the pictures? The animals and the people and the gods? And the stone mask?"

"Somewhat." In truth, he found the pictures impossible to distinguish. The zig-zagged lines looked like something out of a mathematics problem, to say nothing of their smashed-in faces. And the blandness of the colors! To want to know more of a world that existed in blood and brown, he will never understand it.

"Mark my words," Jonathan promises, "I'll be putting things in museums someday!"
When the *Berenice* touches shore at Southampton, it is well past midnight and the three carriages have been waiting for hours. They do not linger on farewells then outside of the general promise to keep in touch. Donagan is returning to Oxford to pack up Cross' things; Webb is off to Normandy for another matchmaking session; Wilcox will be staying at the port to inspect the other ships' conditions.

As soon as they are inside the carriage, Jonathan kicks off his shoes, throwing both waistcoat and tie. Dio does the same, though his movements are more measured. They shove the shoes and bags to the other side and Jonathan yawns, leaning against Dio's shoulder.

"Dio," he whispers, when London is already in-sight.

"What?"

"Do you think he got it off?"

"What?"

"The corset."

Dio laughs then, lightly headbutting the other man, "Now Jojo," he teases, "It's not gentlemanly to meddle in others' bedrooms."

"I'm not!" Jonathan huffs, sitting upright and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "It's just, well. Cross *did* have us come along to keep Webb and Wilcox in check. I feel terrible that Cross had to... had to..." Although Dio cannot see Jonathan's expression, he's sure the other is blushing. "Nevermind," he mutters.

"You mean," Dio goads.

"Don't say it!" With impeccable positioning, Jonathan manages to cover Dio's mouth with his palm, "It's not proper, you're right. I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"Brat," Dio says without spite, pushing the hand away.

- When the carriage pulls into the square, the new day has already broken. They slip into their shoes (though Jonathan forgoes his coat) and take their bags, thanking the driver for his midnight run.

"We're back!" Jonathan announces as they enter the empty flat, flopping down on the sofa. "Oh, how I missed this place!" He kicks his shoes off a second time, stretching his arms and legs.

"It was barely a week," Dio points out, depositing his own travelling bag in his room. He changes out of the suit (what was left of it, at least) and goes for a shower. When he steps out of the washroom in a robe, Jonathan is predictably snoring away. Leave it to his cousin, Dio thinks, to be able to fall asleep in near-blinding sunlight. Just in case, he throws a light sheet over the other. He dries himself off and throws on another formal set -- as it turned out, the hideously boring three-piece suit Jonathan had convinced him to get fits perfectly with courtroom dresscodes. After he's combed and recombed his hair, straightened out his collar and tightened his cufflinks and laces, he double-checks his pre-packed briefcase for the relevant documents.
It's only when he's unlatching the door that Jonathan rouses, sitting up to blearily blink at him.

"Dio...? Where are you going?"

"There's a trial I've been asked to observe."

"Oh." Jonathan lies back down. "Have a good time."

"See you at supper."

The court case contesting the validity of a will ends prematurely with the non-familial side withdrawing their claim halfway. As a result, Dio is able to return to the flat before eight. Jonathan is off of the couch at least, though his head is buried in his books.

"Ah, Dio!" Jonathan exclaims, "Welcome back! How was the trial?"

"Uneventful." Then he walks over to the icebox and frowns. "Jojo, did you not buy groceries?"

"No, sorry," Jonathan winces, checking the time, "I could run out and some now!"

"Don't bother," Dio sighs, setting down his briefcase, "We can buy them tomorrow. Let's eat out tonight."

"You know," Jonathan starts, while they're waiting for their orders to arrive, "You always say your cases are uneventful."

"Not always."

"Oh alright. If they're not eventful they're normal or boring or unremarkable or..." Here, he prattles off four or five synonyms.

"So?" Dio retorts, "They are. These are either mock trials or petty cases."

"I find it hard to believe they'd make you sit through so many boring ones!"

"They're trying to drill the methodology in," Dio grates, "Because life isn't filled with suspense and intrigue. As a rule of thumb, there are a dozen civil cases for every criminal one." He pauses, considering. "Maybe more than that."

"It must be important to them," Jonathan continues, "To raise a claim in court over it."

"I suppose," Dio shrugs.

"What's the most common reason for going to court then?" Jonathan asks, fiddling with the utensils.

"What do you think?"

Their dishes arrive then and Jonathan is momentarily distracted. When he's finished his fillet however, he returns to the question at-hand, picking at his vegetables while thinking it over.

"Non-fatal accidents?" he guesses.

"Inheritances." Dio trades his carrots for peas before adding: "You know how it is. Both parties feel they got the short end of the stick. We sat through a case where both prosecutor and defender engaged in, well, fisticuffs."
"In a court room?" Jonathan asks, eyes wide.

"Mm."

"Surely it was a large inheritance."

"Two acres and fourty crowns."

"So what happened?"

"The judge threw them out. I don't know what happened to the property. They probably demanded a retrial though."

"Does Coward Chance deal with those sort of cases?"

"I suppose they must," he shrugs, finishing off the peas, "Anyways. Why the sudden interest?"

"Well," Jonathan starts, looking abashed, "I realized when we were sitting around chatting on the ship that I never really asked about your studies. I mean, I know you're really good at it and that law is an important and growing field, but I didn't know how it was..."

"Administered?"

"Yes. That." He tilts his fork side to side before looking up again. "Dio, you like it, right? Law, I mean."

"I don't dislike it," he carefully replies. "Why?"

"Father wanted to know," Jonathan admits, looking guilty. "I think he was scared you were chasing money or something."

Like the rest of the populace, Dio hears.

"Dio," he starts anew, "You know that money is no issue, right? That your work can be your passion? Father is very proud of you, even more than me I think, but he still wants you to be happy."

"I know," Dio murmurs, giving a small smile. "But you can't expect the rest of the world to share your passions, Jojo."

"I'm not...!"

"I am, I suppose," he appends. "Happy, that is."

- Jonathan submits the final draft of his dissertation in the third week of July. The board of examiners will reconvene at the end of August so it's a nail-biting wait until then.

At the recommendation of his adviser, he sits in for an interview. It is for the position of assistant lecturer, a part-time occupation asking for three two hour lectures each week on the subject of general archaeology. The spot, as noted by Dr. Nottingham, is traditionally reserved for recent graduates. For, he continues, the only thing more rewarding than discovering knowledge was imparting it. Suitably inspired, Jonathan parrots his advisor word-for-word at the interview and is offered the position on the spot.
As with all good news, Dio is the first person he thinks of sharing it with. Unfortunately, his cousin is away observing another trial so Jonathan tends to the flat for a couple hours. When Dio returns, the table is already set and the stew is simmering on the hob.

"So I was thinking," Jonathan starts, blowing on a cut of potato, "Of asking Father to renew the lease on this flat for another year or two."

"Naturally."

"You don't mind, do you? If you want your own place, I'll understand."

"No," Dio shakes his head, "This arrangement is fine. It'll be easier to settle into work if I don't need to move things."

"Mm, makes sense," Jonathan nods, breaking off some bread to dip. "Well, the position is three days a week, and six hours at that, so I guess I'll be spending a lot of time in the library!"

"How much does it pay?"

"I didn't ask. Why? Should I have?"

"But they'll be paying you?"

"Yes. I suppose they will. It is a job, after all." Jonathan shivers with anticipation. "A job! Me -- teaching!" He beams at his cousin, "Dio, I'm so excited! I mean, I'll miss the others... though I think Miss Murray will visit frequently, especially if Dr. Petrie is to have a collection here."

Jonathan's enthusiasm is contagious, especially where their shared future is concerned. And Dio thinks: Jonathan would never have to work for his keep; so what if he would paid in pennies? Or if they didn't plan to pay him at all?

"I'm glad," he says, smiling indulgently, "Congratulations."

-It is only after the provisional marks have come in and the department tutor reassures him that his first is neigh-guaranteed and he forwards the message to Coward Chance and they confirm his spot in the firm -- only after he's written to Mr. Joestar thanking him renewing the lease on the flat and giving him such opportunity -- that the letter from stateside arrives.

Well, it's not really stateside, though all post from the Americas went through New York.

_Dear Mr. Jonathan Joestar_ the letter begins.

"What is it?" Dio asks, when he catches the other standing stock-still in the entranceway. He is no longer in the habit of reading other people's post.

"Dio," Jonathan says, saying his name like a prayer. "Dio, Dio, Dio." His trembling hands make the packet shake like a leaf.

"What? What is it?"

Rather than responding, or even sharing the contents of the letter, Jonathan tosses it to the side, dropping to his knees.

"Jojo?" Dio demands, striding over, "What are you -- "
"Thank you," Jonathan gasps, clasping his hands while tears flow freely. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I've prayed for this -- but never in my wildest dreams did I think -- " Too caught up in the moment, he chokes on his breath, doubling over with a heady sob.

- 

His name is Francisco del Paso y Troncoso and Dio hates him.

He is an archaeologist-historian from the largest liberated Spanish colony and, by some stroke of chance, has gotten his hands on a draft of Jonathan's paper. The letter (penned by a secretary certainly as he doubts the other man knew any English) explains how he was so impressed that someone in Britain had not only gotten hold of a Stone Mask but that they had actually researched it farther than most local Mesoamerican historians and if Jonathan were so inclined, there was an excavation starting up the next year which Dr. del Paso y Troncoso would be heading.

How did he react, initially? He doesn't know. Did he offer congratulations? Would Jonathan have cared if he didn't? His cousin had stayed there, keeled over from sheer excitement, for what seemed like hours. He smile he shared with Dio afterwards was so brilliant that Dio had wanted to vomit.

He hates the man. Hates, hates, hates him.

'Are you sure about this?' he had asked the next day. 'Have you ever corresponded with him?'

Jonathan shakes his head, no, no he had not. But the same secretary who had written to Jonathan had also written to Hugh Hudson. It was absolutely unheard of, Jonathan tells him that evening, for an archaeologist in the Americas to take an interest in European students. It's impossible, Dio thinks, but his grin is even wider.

The man with the long name is more than established, he is legendary. His projects are supported by the central administration and his discoveries are said to be cultural advances.

'But what of your position as assistant lecture?' he asks after that. His cousin, who had valued steadfastness and fidelity only laughs. Apparently he had talked it over with both the advisor and department head. They were in unanimous agreement. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and Jonathan should seize it by the reins. And, if he wouldn't mind (Jonathan adds, pleased with himself) could he forward some of their excavation methods? For the purposes of comparison, of course.

'Are you sure you're ready?' is what he asks next. This makes sense, he hopes. For Jonathan was only an undergraduate student. Surely there would be other people more suitable for the job. Jonathan is more determined than ever, he insists that he'll catch up on lost time. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, he repeats. I can't pass this up.

"What of the language?"

"I'll learn."

"And the living conditions?"

"I'll manage."

"And the estate?"

"Father will manage."
"What about Father?"

"He's in great health still! Dio, this excavation will only last three years!"

"Three years?"

"Well, maybe five if we find a lot. But Father is still so sprightly! You've seen him riding with me! He'll be glad to have me out of his hair, I'm sure of it."

'But what about me?' Dio wants to ask. It catches in his throat however and so he retires for the night.

Out of desperation, he even writes to the Viscount. It is a coherent letter filled with logical points, this much he is certain. And though it is difficult to comprise anything when he cannot see straight, he manages it nonetheless. The response Mr. Joestar gives him is nothing more than talk. He doesn't even bother addressing most of Dio's points, missing the issue entirely by apologizing for forcing Dio to stick with Jonathan for so long and a promise, yet again, to support him in all his future endeavors.

"You stupid wretched man," he curses, crumpling the edges of the telegram. He rips it to shreds and spits on it, but the air refuses to return to his lungs.

"Useless, worthless, good-for-nothing piece of shit!"

Despite his sudden desire to master the Spanish language in four months, Jonathan does pick up on his cousin's change in humor. He even attributes it correctly to his departure!

"What?" Dio asks, picking listlessly at his food over dinner.

"The Midsummer Fair," Jonathan repeats, "It's in London right now. Would you come with me? I think we could do for some entertainment."

Does he say yes? Does Jonathan need to convince him? He can't remember, just that, come Saturday, the two of them are in a carriage bound for the fair.

Jonathan does not talk about books or archaeology or excavations or even Mexico. He drags Dio around from booth-to-booth, sampling the popcorn, candied chestnuts, and saltwater taffies. They stroll arm-in-arm throughout the whole fair and when Dio's gaze settles on a faded wooden kaleidoscope, Jonathan wastes fifteen shillings and twelve pence for the second-place prize.

"I'm sorry," he says, offering his cousin the prize, "I'm still a terrible shot."

"I like it," Dio replies, taking the ugly beanbag doll, "Here, let me try."

Sixteen shillings and five pence later, he manages to win the same doll.

Jonathan snickers, taking the matching toy. "Well," he tries, squinting at the godforsaken thing, "I guess you could call it cute..."

"Don't even try Jojo," Dio grumbles, stuffing his hands (along with the doll) into his pockets before stalking off.

Why did Jonathan bring him out here? Why was he always following the other man's lead? In reality, he should be happy, he knows. If not because it was likely Jonathan might die out there and
he would be the sole inheritor, then because Jonathan was his cousin and adopted brother and this clearly was an amazing opportunity and he should be encouraged to take it.

More than death however, he is scared of being forgotten.

"Dio!" Jonathan calls, elbowing past the crowd to wrap a hand about his arm, "Dio, wait up!"

"What do you want from me, Jonathan?" Dio asks. His expression must betray something, for Jonathan looks like he's been punched. The pained expression does not last long for he conquers the demons holding him back within seconds. Biting his bottom lip, he steps forward to wrap his cousin in a hug.

"Jojo! What are you -- but you -- " he splutters, landing on the obvious, "You're making a scene."

"Shut up," Jonathan says, holding on tighter. "I know you, Dio. I know you're worried for me. I promise I won't die out there, that I'll send postcards every month -- no, every week -- if you want. If it weren't for you, well, I don't think I would have survived without Danny and Erina." He bows his head, pressing his forehead against Dio's shoulder. "I'm really grateful to you, for following me to Chichester and then Hugh Hudson, for staying with me in the Kensington manor, for helping me revise, for joining the rugby team with me."

'So stay,' Dio wants, so badly, to say. 'Ignore the offer, take the assistant lecturer position, and stay in London.'

"I'll miss you. Much more than you'll miss me, I promise."

"If," Dio starts, swallowing hard, "If I get married?"

"Then you'll make her the happiest woman in the world."

Out of options, he moves his arms to return the embrace.
For 'tis noble and wise to rub the world's eyes

As examination results for the arts department will be announced on the first Monday of September, most of the graduating students arrive back in London the weekend before. At this point, Dio is a mess, though he is trying hard to keep it from showing. He can't remember the day-to-day and, at points, finds the world fading in and out. He sees himself making dinner and then observing another petty case. He must be going through the actions, otherwise they would have kicked him out. The representative from Coward Chance is saying something now. Like clockwork, he replies.

Does Jonathan notice? He does not know. The other has spent the remainder of his allowance on Spanish grammar books and drifts from the flat to the library, mindlessly repeating phrases.

Some point after the release of the results, they meet up with their coursemates again. The five of them catch up on ambitions and passions while Dio tries to tune them out. Wei would be a barrister in China. Pyrce had decided to be a judge. Murray had documented some three thousand artifacts. And Nuttall... well, she would be travelling with her husband, wherever his interests took them. It was her husband, she does not shy away from saying, who insisted that del Paso y Troncoso take a look at Jonathan's dissertation.

It is cathartic, to find the source of the problem. Satisfying, even, to have a physical entity to hate.

But even if he killed her, even if he blinded her or broke her hands or made it otherwise impossible for her to continue working, Jonathan will not stay.

"Dio?" Pyrce asks, "Are you alright?"

"Of course," he says, turning back to their group. "I never imagined you would sign up for more lectures."

-  

"Wei!" Pyrce calls, after the luncheon is over.

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed something... off?"

"Off?"

"Unusual. Out of the ordinary."

"I know what it means," Wei mutters, rolling his eyes. "More unusual than you being the only one continuing your studies?"

"I'm talking," and here, Pyrce turns from side to side, double-checking that everyone else had left, "About Brando."

"What about him?"

"Didn't he seem quiet today?"

"Not especially."
"No, he was definitely quiet," Pyrce shakes his head, "Did you see how he looked when Joestar announced he would be going to Mexico?"

"As uninterested as usual? Pyrce, he probably already heard Joestar talking about it all summer."

"No. No, it's something else..." he taps his chin, brows furrowing. "Oh, well, if you didn't notice anything, then it might've been my imagination! See you at the drinks reception tonight!"

"See you."

- 

"Hey Brando!" Pyrce calls, coming over with two glasses of wine, "What're you doing over there?"

"Nothing." His classmate plucks one of the glasses from his hand, downing the drink with a violent tilting of the wrist. Then he trades empty for full and downs the second glass, wiping his mouth on the edge of his sleeve. "Thank you," he adds, sounding remarkably sober, "Get me another glass, will you?"

Two glasses turn into two bottles and halfway through the reception, Wei and Pyrce end up shouldering the top graduate in their department. Despite his inability to stand, Dio still causes a veritable scene, snapping and snarling that he didn't need help, didn't need anyone and they hurry to excuse themselves.

"Joestar!" Pyrce hollers at the third-floor flat, "Joestar, come get your idiot cousin!"

For all his threats and curses, Dio is laughably meek when his cousin is sprinting down the stairs.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing, nothing," Pyrce insists.

"He had too much to drink, that's all," Wei offers.

"I can smell the alcohol on his breath..." Jonathan mutters, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah, well, we have reason to celebrate."

"Thank you for bringing him back, Mr. Pyrce, Mr. Wei. Come on Dio, let's go back." Dio slurs something incomprehensible; Jonathan pays him no mind.

Wordlessly, the two students watch the progression of lights in the hallway, ending with the leftmost window on the third floor. After the light is turned on and then off and Dio presumably tucked into bed, Pyrce turns to his classmate.

"Have we ever seen him this drunk?"

"No, but..." Wei hesitates, grasping for rationality, "As you said, we had reason to celebrate. Perhaps he lost track of time."

"We saw him drinking from the bottle."

"Alright," he admits, as they walk back to the department office, "That was uncharacteristic."

"It's because his cousin is going away," Pyrce explains, nodding sagely. "You've seen how close they are."
"Now you're overthinking it."

"Am I?"

"If he was that worried, why would Brando be encouraging his cousin to go?"

"Has he?"

"We haven't seen otherwise, have we?"

"There's a logical fallacy in there somewhere," Pyrce mutters, cracking his knuckles. "Look, Wei, I've seen this sort of thing before. My second and third sisters were like this, thick as thieves, playmates since they were babies, you know how it is. Well, when Milly was being courted by a German, I thought it would never pan out, the way Ollie was acting. She threw such a fit," he recounts, blithely ignoring his coursemate's disinterest, "I think she even threatened suicide!"

"Pyrce," Wei sighs, far too used to the other's anecdotes, "You'll notice Brando has no intention to follow his cousin to Mexico and has not made any threats of suicide as of late."

"No, he hasn't. But he's got the same look in his eyes."

"As your sister?"

"Yes."

"You're overthinking things," Wei repeats, straightening his tie and combing back his hair. "Now are you coming with me to explain his outburst?"

"To Merriweather?" Pyrce makes a face, "You'll be better off without me, the old fellow still has it in for me."

"I can't imagine why."

"It was an accident, I swear, an accident!"

-  

"Brando!" Pyrce hollers a second time, rapping his fist against the ground floor door, "Brando, get down here this instant!"

Jonathan pokes his head out of the window, head and shoulders covered with a towel.

"Mr. Pyrce?" he asks, "And Mr. Wei too, what's the matter?"

"Mr. Joestar, is your cousin with you?"

"Yes, he is. But he's washing up now. We've come back from rugby practice you see. Give me one minute!" he closes the window and presumably throws on his clothes, running downstairs to open the door, "Would you like to come in? It shouldn't be long now."

"No thank you," Wei declines, "It's getting late."

"I could take a message if you like?"

The two law students exchange glances.
"It's nothing important," Pyrce says in the end. "Tell him we'll see him tomorrow!"

"Have a good evening," Wei adds. They walk away then, leaving a perplexed Jonathan on the doorstep.

"That's funny..." he mutters to himself, closing the door and walking back up, "It sounded like they had urgent business."

"Those two called?" Dio asks, after he's dried himself off.

"Mm. I offered to take a message, or have them come up, but they said it was nothing important." Jonathan pauses, carefully adding, "It sounded important though, from the way Mr. Pyrce was shouting."

"He's always shouting about something," Dio replies, rolling his eyes, "He probably wanted to see my notes. I can't believe he plans to be a judge."

"But if that were the case," Jonathan starts, feeling even more confused, "Why would Mr. Wei come along?"

"Don't dwell on it," Dio snorts, "Come, we need to talk formations. Kensington wants a ten point lead against Birkbeck this weekend."

After Dio misses two more spectator appointments at the local court, even Wei agrees that something is wrong.

"We said he's been sick for a week," he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose, "But they'll be asking for a doctor's notice soon."

"Oh so now you don't think he's just relaxing?"

"No. You were right, I apologize. Something is wrong with him. He's missed more class in the past week than in the past two years. Top of the class or no, he's close to the minimum attendance rate."

He leans back against his chair, lacing his fingers. "So. Do you have a plan?"

"Do you think he'll listen to reason? Like, if we talk to him?"

There's a beat of silence before they chuckle.

"Okay, okay, I'm done joking. Let's think seriously."

They sit in silence for a couple minutes.

"About your sisters..." Wei finally starts, refusing to believe he was going along with an anecdote, "I presume they're both alive?"

"Of course." Pyrce quickly crosses himself, "Wouldn't joke about them otherwise."

"So?"

"So?"

"Did your sister accept the... engagement?"
"Oh yes, of course," he laughs on reminiscence, "She shut up pretty quickly when she found... ah." He snaps his fingers, standing up, "That's it!"

"What?"

"Come on, come on," Pyrce urges, throwing down a tip, "I think I've got a plan."

He leads them out of the immigrant gentlemen's club and into a telegraph office.

"A telegram?" Wei asks, raising an eyebrow. "How is that..."

"No, not a telegram. This." Pyrce drops to his knees, pointing at the colored pamphlets and stickers stuck to the underside of the booth. He rips one off and triumphantly presents it to his classmate.

"Ollie," he starts, "mellowed out the second she got a German of her own to marry."

"A whore?" Wei asks, "Your plan is to have Brando marry a whore?"

"Not marry her! I'm not that crazy! But you know us men," he smiles suggestively, "We've a, well, need for physical passion." And then, when Wei continues to look unenthused and unconvinced, he elaborates: "Have you ever seen Brando go after a woman? Yeah, I thought so. It's a bad habit, that's what my parents always said, for Ollie and Milly to be so close. Well, the same thing applies to those two."

Wei considers this.

"Is it possible," he cautiously suggests, "That Brando has no interest in women?"

"No interest in women?" Pyrce repeats, laughing. "Who would believe such a -- " he pauses, "Oh. Well, I've never considered it, but now that you mention it..."

After being kicked out of the telegraph office for loitering, the two of them amble about the seedier parts of London.

"We're in Whitechapel, aren't we?" Pyrce asks, out of the blue.

"Yes. Why?"

"It looks so pleasant in the sunlight. Surely you've heard of the murder?"

"Of the prostitute? Who hasn't." Wei snorts, "It's a lot of fuss if you ask me."

"Tell me about it! Fellows like that aren't right in the head, you can sniff them out a mile away," he laughs, "Do you think they'll hang him once they find him?"

"For the murder of one girl?"

"Well it was a butchering."

"Ah. Good point."

They pause before a boarded-up establishment, and Pyrce casually remarks: "My mother and sisters were up in arms, you know? Telling me to take every precaution! My father got riled up too -- he even bought me a knife!"

"Can you use it?"
"No, it's back in my flat. Fantastic for peeling fruit though. I told my mother, 'Mother, I'm not a prostitute, I don't wander around brothels at night.' He stops and then snaps his fingers a second time. "That's it!"

"What now?"

"How about a male prostitute? I heard they're offered quite close to campus, even."

"Wait, wait, wait," Wei puts out his hands, "This is all speculation on our part. Imagine if you didn't like men and were caught at one of those places!"

"Hm. Good point. Alright then, back to the original plan." He pulls his diary out from his wallet, flipping through it, "How's this Saturday look?"

"Sure."

"Great! Now to find us a brothel." He rubs his hands enthusiastically.

"Actually," Wei coughs, "I might be of use here."

Mid hand-rub, Pyrce freezes. Then he whirls on his coursemate, smile wide.

"Wei!" he admonishes, shaking the other man's shoulders, "You dirty Chinese dog!"

-"You're mistaken," Dio snaps, after he had been accosted by Wei and Pyrce immediately after the game against Birkbeck in which the Hugh Hudson team had won by three points. "There's no chance of me not graduating."

"But you've been missing trials left and right!"

"Because I sat in them during the summer."

"...Oh."

"And now you've got Jojo worried I'll be unable to graduate," he grumbles, wiping the dirt from his face. "Is that all?"

"Oh to hell with it," Pyrce declares, grabbing onto Dio's shoulders and steering him into the waiting carriage, "I won't have all our plans be for naught."

Dio laughs bitterly at that, but allows himself to be pushed in.

"Now," he says, crossing his arms, "What's this all about?"

"In a noble -- "

"Albeit misled -- "

"Shh, Wei. Yes, in a noble effort to lighten things up, we've decided to take you to a brothel."

"What!"

"Don't worry, we won't force you to pick a girl. But if it does progress that far, well..." Pyrce smiles coyly, "Let's just say we've worked out an alibi for you."
"This is ridiculous," Dio spits, "And I won't have any part in it."

"Is it true then?" Pyrce counters, "That you prefer men? I mean, sure it's illegal, but who doesn't have a vice or two?"

"What?" Dio splutters, "No!"

"Do you have a girl you're sweet on then? Or a fiancée?"

Dio's silence is enough.

"Then we're all in the same boat," Pyrce concludes. "Wei has already arranged everything so we might as well go along. Who knows when we'll have the chance to do something like this again?"

"Just because I'm..." Dio trails off, digesting his coursemate's argument. "Wei?" he asks, turning to the other man, "You arranged this?"

Wei coughs into his hand.

"Oh! Our little Chinaman is a modest one!" Pyrce laughs, throwing an arm about his shoulders. "But apparently that's why he rejected Miss Murray, you know? Because he didn't want someone to answer to while visiting the mesdames deluxes."

"Leave it to you to put it like that..."

"So you've been before?" Dio asks, trying to picture the standoffish and oftentimes sullen man with a prostitute.

"Oh yes." A hitch.

"Many times."

"See?" Pyrce adds, "We have a connoisseur amongst our ranks! Brando, ease up! Live a little! Between Wei and myself, you're in good hands!"

"It bores you," Wei remarks, after they've spent two hours in the sitting room of the brothel.

"Not entirely," Dio lies, "The woman are pleasant enough."

"At least Pyrce is enjoying himself." Indeed, their coursemate had already disappeared into one of the rooms.

"Hn."

"Well," Wei leans in close, "I confess there is an underground floor. I am a frequent customer there." He gets up, sauntering over to a beaded curtain entrance way. Interest piqued, Dio excuses himself and follows suit.

"Is this the sport you were speaking of?" Dio asks, pulling back the beads.

"Mr. Brando," Wei addresses, standing at the start of another staircase, "From one thief to another, I ask this: do you steal for necessity?"

The question gives Dio pause. He thinks back to the instances where he had stolen for necessity -- the last of which Wei had been witness to. But there were other times, countless other times, where he had looked at something and wanted it. Whether it was the fox-fur gloves or the ties of indian
"At times," he says. "But not always."

"I see." Wei takes off his gloves, pocketing them, "I am not the same, then. I have not felt need for so long. In the place of that... invaluable emotion... what would you propose to replace it?"

Without missing a beat, Dio says: "Fear."

"Precisely. Well, the basement chambers are for restrained demonstrations of fear," he gives an odd smile, "You are welcome to follow, Mr. Brando. I assure you the girls are quite professional."

At the foot of the narrow stairwell is a humongous man. There are two doors behind him and the stench of blood about him. The flickering candles illuminate little of the chamber, though Dio is certain he sees bloodstains.

"So," he says, "The Chinaman brought a friend."

"Hello, Frederick," Wei greets, inclining his head. "Two passes, please."

"You know the rules. One man, one crown."

Further intrigued, Dio reaches for his coinpurse only to be stilled by Wei.

"Allow me," he insists, "For I fear this is not everyone's pleasure." He drops two crowns into the guard's outstretched hand. The man unceremoniously bites into both of them, spitting rudely onto the floor, before pocketing them and turning around. After a bit of shuffling and swearing in the right doorway, he extracts two white mice: two squeaking, clawing, starving white mice.

"Nasty little buggers," Frederick adds, passing one to each man.

"Follow my lead," Wei instructs, carelessly lobbing his mouse at the wall. There's a squeak followed by a splat.

"Uncaring as ever," the guard notes. He turns to Dio then, with a toothy grin, "It's a pity your friend seems to have lost his nerve."

"No matter," Wei murmurs, moving to pluck the mouse out of Dio's hands. "I'm sorry you had to witness this Mr. Brando, but I -- "

He is cut off by Dio throwing his mouse on the ground and crushing it underneath his heel. The animal has no chance to cry out.

"Hey! You're not supposed to -- "

"I hate rodents," Dio spits, wiping his hands, "If I could kill them all, I would."

"I believe we're allowed entry?" Wei prompts. The guard harrumphs but lets them through the left door.

"Thank you for recommending this place," Dio says, as they're entering a den of lust and sin. His fingers are trembling; it's as if his blood was set aflame. There's nothing quite like it, taking out one's frustrations on a living thing. "I will enjoy it, I'm sure."
He should enjoy this, he knows. All around him are men and women and various instruments of torture. There is the sound of a cat of nine tails striking against flesh, the muffled cries of a gagged girl. There's the creak of the ropes and cogs of a stretching table, and every once in a while, a truly animalistic howl echoes from the inner chambers. And it's not as if the women were unattractive -- there were so many of them, and in so many different states of undress, he suspects even Jonathan would have found someone to fancy amongst them.

But therein lies the root of his problem: however attractive the women, however malicious the pleasure, he would still choose Jonathan in the end.

There's a sickening irony in all this, he knows. He, who had wanted Jonathan to look at no other -- who had killed off the only woman Jonathan had ever (or would ever) love -- was now unable to look at any other. No, more than that, he had had no interest in anyone else for years.

The extent of his affections coupled with the certainty of Jonathan's departure makes him sick to his stomach. He stumbles to the washroom, dry heaving over the latrine, and hates.

What was the point of planning -- what was the point of pretending to hold only brotherly affection, of being a good son and student -- if he didn't have Jonathan to show for it? The whole invitation from del Paso y Troncoso seemed to be a cosmic joke, like the Almighty himself was laughing at him, Dio. Bitterly, he wonders what the point of planning anything was, if more planning only allowed for greater losses from some unforeseen circumstance.

To have Jonathan sack their plans at the drop of the hat -- he could have reached the same conclusion without seven years of careful coddling!

The thought of so much wasted time and so many wasted opportunities makes the bile bubble back up.

At twenty years old, his cousin was still a spoiled brat in every sense. He had been prepared to work for loose change and library access! And he dragged Dio to that awful fair, wasted four crowns on a pair of hideous toys, and had the gall to say he would be the one suffering!

No, Dio thinks, Jonathan never stopped for him. In fact, Dio can count on one hand the number of times his cousin had given up.

It was always grief, he realizes with startling clarity, that incapacitated Jonathan time and again.

And it will be grief, he decides, that keeps his cousin from leaving.

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The slums he grew up in are strangely familiar; even the beggars look the same. The inn his father had run into the ground is still boarded up; infested with rodents both human and animal no doubt. Good, he finds himself thinking.

A strange sense of pride, excitement even, wells up in him. To kill a father twice. Of course the Viscount was a better man than his father -- there would be no one in history who could top that worthless drunkard's callous cruelty. But that man, he remembers, is just as guilty for his mother's death. What kind of brother would allow his sister to marry Dario Brando? What kind of brother would believe her happy with him?

He would not allow Jonathan to marry a harlot, of this much he is certain.

Despite his mask, the owner of the oriental apothecary recognizes him. This sort of drug needs to
be taken in two doses: the first creates the sensation of sickness, the second is truly fatal. He orders four ounces of the previous drug and is reminded once more that a Chinese man with the same birthmark lived to a ripe old age.

From there, he takes a train and then a carriage, expediting his arrival at the Joestar manor. Everything is the same as it has always been: the servants are in their quarters and Mr. Joestar is in his office. It's child's play for Dio to sneak in through the back entrance, tip-toeing his way into the Viscount's washroom where he mixes the first batch of poison into the tooth powder and tonic. He then detours into his own room where he changes out of his rugby outfit (taking some more coinage) before slipping out the same door.

All in all, he's back on the train bound for London in less than two hours.

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It's half past ten when he returns to the flat.

"Welcome back!" Jonathan greets, going to take his coat and hat. "How was Hertfordshire?"

"Productive." He makes a note to thank his coursemates for the alibi.

"You didn't take a bag?"

"Didn't need it. I slept on the train."

"I see." Jonathan steps back, looking him up and down, before smiling, "I'm glad. You look better, Dio."

"Do you mean," Dio asks, affecting an affronted tone, "that I looked bad before?"

"Oh no," Jonathan laughs, sitting down on the couch, "But I'm happy you're happy. We've got late practice tomorrow and Kensington's announced the finals are going to be against the Victorians right after graduation." He pats the cushion next to him before handing Dio another play to read aloud. "But before that, let's keep reading. I want to know how Barabas is punished."

"Oh Dio," he says, when they've finished making a mockery of Marlowe, "I'm so excited!"

"As am I, Jojo," Dio replies, lips quirking, "As am I."
And clamber after love while yearning (Sorry.)

The press is abuzz the next day with reports of a second murder. The state of the corpse is even worse than the first and witness reports of a cloaked man with a butcher's knife send the populace into a panic.

"Worried?" Dio repeats, "Why would I be worried?"

"Because he lives in London!"

"Yes and he clearly has a preference. As neither of us frequent Whitechapel," he laughs, "I doubt we're in any danger."

"But what if he moves?"

"It'd be hard to mistake you as a prostitute, Jojo," Dio dryly replies, turning the newspaper over. Sure, he and his coursemates had been in Whitechapel on the night of the second murder, but he hadn't noticed anything amiss. It was likely he was already on the train by the time the police discovered the body. There's no chance of divulging this information with Jonathan of course; the other still thought they had gone up north for a case.

"I suppose you're right," Jonathan admits, taking the coversheet to reread, "But it doesn't feel right, you know?"

"Harboring sympathy for harlots now?"

"No! Well -- for the victims, yes. No one deserves to die like that." He mumbles something about the sanctity of human flesh and the unnecessary cruelty involved with corpse desecration, neatly folding the paper so that the sketch of the second victim's remains was obscured from view.

"The police will find him," Dio offers, "They'd lose face otherwise."

"But what if they don't?"

"What is the fear here? That this killer does away with all of Whitechapel's prostitutes? We both know that's impossible."

"It's not that," Jonathan admits, sneaking a glance at the sketch before turning the paper over. He shudders, setting it down on the table. "It's unnerving. To know that other people are capable of... well, that."

"What? Murder?"

"Evil." He looks at Dio, mildly surprised, "Do you not see it, Dio? When I look at the body, I think it's absolutely vile. That he would..."

"This is a problem for the police to solve," Dio reiterates. "Go back to your Spanish conjugations and keep away from Whitechapel; what else is there for you to do?"

Jonathan's concern for two nameless prostitutes is overridden within the week when, on Saturday, they receive a telegram saying the Viscount had fallen ill.
"I don't understand," Jonathan stresses, clenching and unclenching his fists, "This is Father. He never gets ill!"

"It can't be anything serious. We saw him less than a month ago. He was healthy then."

"But if it wasn't serious... then why would the servants send for us?"

"Get some rest," Dio instructs, leaning against the side of the carriage himself, "We'll find out soon enough."

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"It's nothing, it's nothing," the Viscount declares while bedridden, "I slept poorly one night and ended up tripping on the stairs. Jojo, Dio, you needn't have come all the way down!"

"But Father," Jonathan protests, "You've been taking medicine! I've seen the butler give it to you!"

"Oh, this?" he cuts himself off to cough into a handkerchief, "It's just for this cough of mine. I don't even have a fever, the Reverend said I should stay in bed for a couple days as a precaution."

"Wait, wait -- even the Reverend came by?"

"Oh you know the Father. He's got a good heart but he worries too much. I always tell him he'll have more white hair than me at this rate!"

"But Father," Jonathan chides, refusing to laugh at the joke, "You should still have a doctor come look at you. Just to be safe."

"Nonsense Jojo," the Viscount stands his ground, "I feel myself getting better already. Now, take some treats from the kitchen for your coursemates and send them my well-wishes, will you? Just because your results are out doesn't mean you can leave school. I hear the Kensington boy is determined to come home a rugby champion."

"Oh yes!" Jonathan agrees, beaming, "We're to play against the Victorians right after graduation for the London championship. Get well soon Father, so you can come watch us!"

"I will, I will. I'm sorry I can't send you two off. Do you need any more allowance? My wallet is right over there."

The two students exchange glances.

"We're fine," Dio replies, "Just concentrate on resting. And get well soon."

"Yes," Jonathan adds, "Get well soon!"

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"What did you think?" Jonathan starts, when they're bound for London once more.

"He was ill, certainly," Dio slowly replies, "But I do not think it was as severe as the servants made it out to be. As Father said, he doesn't even have a fever."

"You're right." Jonathan sighs, "Oh, but it's that cough of his worries me. Back in Chichester, we were taught to be wary of coughs especially."

"Oh? Why?"
"It's probably just superstition but..." he quickly crosses himself, "The teachers said the true symptoms were often overlooked. Because of the cough, I mean."

"I see." Dio taps his fingers against the windowsill, "Well, I confess my knowledge of medicine is subpar. But if you think it's necessary, you should write to Father once we're back. Tell him to call for a doctor, at least."

"He'd think I'm making a fuss over nothing." Jonathan shakes his head, "I'll wait a week. If he's not better by then, then I'll call for a doctor myself."

When a week passes and they receive word that the Viscount's condition has not improved, Jonathan calls for a doctor. The Viscount is diagnosed with a light case of the chills and prescribed three hot meals a day and even more bedrest.

Seeing Jonathan's grief-stricken face, Dio thinks his cousin might put off his excavation plans just to nurse his father back to health. That would be acceptable, he thinks, already calculating the possibility of a daily commute from the mansion to London.

"If Father isn't better by graduation," he tells Dio with a resolute gaze, "I'll stay behind. I'll write to Dr. del Paso y Troncoso... I'm sure he'll understand."

"Jojo," Dio breathes, hedging his bets, "I'm sure that won't be necessary. And if it came to it... wouldn't it be easier for me to take care of him? I'm sure Coward Chance will let me commute."

"No, Dio," Jonathan sighs, "Thank you, really. But I've let you carry too much responsibility. If Father is this ill, then..."

Unfortunately, when Mr. Joestar hears of his son's plans, he's gathers up all the strength in his ailing body.

"Jojo, have you lost your wits?!" the Viscount roars, "I didn't raise you to squander opportunities! Look at me!" he raises one swollen hand, flexing his fingers with difficulty, "I may be like this, but I can still move, I can still walk. Don't act like I'm on my deathbed yet, boy. And Dio!" he addresses the other man, "You too! Don't frown so much, your face will spoil. Now, I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense, do you understand?"

"But Father -- !"

"Jonathan Joestar," the bedridden man carefully enunciates, setting his own death in stone, "If that ship leaves without you on it, so help me, I swear on your mother's name I'll ship you to the Americas myself!"

"He's too good to me," Jonathan sobs, "What did I do... to deserve a father like him?"

"I'm sure he'll recover," Dio repeats, dabbing at his cousin's cheeks, "Look at how lively he was just now. That's not the manner of a man approaching death."

"I want to believe that, really, I do." He takes his own handkerchief then, rubbing hard at his eyes, "Dio, what can I do? I'm not a doctor. I regret not studying medicine now. If I had, Father wouldn't be in such straits."
"But neither am I. And you have more knowledge of medicine than I. Well, the doctor still thinks it's nothing serious -- "

"But Dio! He's been sick for three weeks!" He covers his eyes, running his palms from cheek to forehead. "Dio, please tell me: should I stay? I know what Father said, and that I'll be of no use, but I think it's better if I did."

"I think," Dio starts, "It is too soon to act."

"But what can I do?" And here, Jonathan voice nearly cracks, "Father might be dying!"

"All you can do," his cousin concludes, "is pray."

And so, Jonathan prays.

A week before the Hugh Hudson graduation ceremonies, the killer's third and fourth victims are discovered, one after another. Once again, they are prostitutes from Whitechapel and once again, they are gruesomely dismembered. Three days before the murder, the killer had sent a letter to the police, saying he would lop off one of the women's ears as a gift. Sure enough, one of the victims was missing an ear.

"It's ghastly," Nuttally declares, "Absolutely ghastly."

"Can women stomach such things?" Pyrce asks.

"I couldn't even read the article," Murray confesses. "And of course it's the only thing the press is interested reporting."

"And what an awful letter to write too."

"Oh, have you read it?" Wei asks.

"Yes. The Central News published it in full."

"Please excuse me," Murray murmurs, standing up. "More lemonade anyone?"

"I'll help," Jonathan adds, following his coursemate to the till.

"It's dreadful," she says, after they've placed a second order, "I don't know why everyone is so interested in it. Back in Calcutta we had similar cases. Some of them were caught, but some weren't. People who kill without remorse like that -- and then to taunt the policemen!" she shudders, "They're just looking for attention."

Though Jonathan stays quiet, he nonetheless looks green around the gills.

"I'm sorry," she continues, "Mr. Brando told us of your father's condition. I pray for his health."

"Oh. That. Yes, thank you." He snaps to attention when their order arrives, taking both pitchers of lemonade back to the table.

"I'm sorry about that," Nuttall amends, returning the newspaper clipping to her handbag. "It was a poor choice of conversation."

"Yes, let's talk of something happier, hm?" Pyrce suggests.
"Graduation robes then? Has everyone's arrived?"

"I need to pin my hat in place," Wei complains.

"You think that's bad? I needed to adjust my hem!"

"Both of us needed extensions," Dio brags.

"What color are your scarves?"

"Blue."

"What!"

"Why, what color are yours?"

"Pink," Jonathan replies, making a face. "It's awful."

"I don't mind," Nuttall preens.

"Well of course you wouldn't," Pyrce points out, "But it's the most popular color for little boy's dresses. Surely the college knew that?"

"I suspect it wasn't in fashion when they chose the colors," Murray reasons.

"Point taken."

They sit in contemplative silence for a while, sipping at their lemonade.

"I had an idea," Pyrce starts, "What if I cut off the extra bits of my hem so Brando and Joestar could -- "

The evening before graduation, Dio returns to the Oriental apothecary having told Jonathan he needed to return a court document.

"This will be the last dose," the store owner chuckles. "I do not need to know who the lucky patient is."

When he's pocketing the packet, he can admit that he didn't plan for this. If Nuttall hadn't introduced Jonathan to her husband, if Pinart hadn't shown the draft to the American Spaniard. if Jonathan hadn't been so eager, if Mr. Joestar had been a little less stubborn --

But those are things he could not account for. This, on the other hand, is entirely in his control.

Jonathan will cry, will rage and grieve, of course. Dio expects him to do so. But after the dust has settled and the Viscount's body buried, he will only have Dio left.

He can see it already -- the certainty of their future. He will make Jonathan happy; he will make sure the other will want for nothing. And after he's more secure, after they've inherited the estate, he plans to go along on his cousin's expeditions -- he will fund them, even.

But until then, he has a part to play.
Needless to say, Mr. Joestar was unable to attend their graduation. He sends the Duke Kensington over in his stead, and the Duke brings an artist with him, ordering a sketch of the two Joestar boys in their graduation robes.

Jonathan, remarkably, manages to keep the tears at bay, thanking his lecturers and advisor and professor for two years of guidance. They tell him to keep in touch, that the part-time lecturer position will be open later, should he tire of fieldwork. Dio does the same with his teachers, standing for two hours for a series of photographs with the rest of the department.

"Father wished us good luck for tomorrow's game," Jonathan reports as they're walking back to the flat. His expression belies his inner turmoil.

"We'll win," Dio predicts. "If we came home as champions, it would brighten his spirits."

"You're right," Jonathan agrees, forcing up a smile, "We should make him proud. And Kensington too. Let's make this a good game, Dio -- our last rugby match at Hugh Hudson."

Imbibed with the belief that a rugby victory would influence his father's fate, Jonathan plays like a man competing for his life. He is, at one point, tackled by four players and still able to maintain possession of the ball. No, more than that, he was able to keep moving. At the last minute, he passes back to Dio who sprints past the laughable remainder of the Victorian players, scoring the winning try. They don't have as much of a lead as Kensington would like, but a win is a win is a win. Dio is hoisted on the Chesters' shoulders as they cheer and chant.

Although Kensington has bought out a pub and offered free tap for three hours, Jonathan is insistent about heading back to the manor. Nuttall demands a postcard from Mexico; Pyrce threatens to keep in touch; handshakes and forwarding addresses are exchanged, along with promises to reconvene for weddings and funerals. They wish Mr. Joestar a speedy recovery (with Murray stressing that Jonathan needed to keep calm, that the patient's manner was easily influenced by their surroundings) before waving their good-byes.

Of course Duke Kensington would have reported their victory, beating Jonathan and Dio by a good four hours. Still, the Viscount seems to be in better spirits, demonstrating that the swelling in his hands was getting better and the pain in his chest has lessened. The three of them share a hearty laugh over some silly joke, with Mr. Joestar reassuring both of them that he was proud of them and would support them in all future endeavors.

While fully believing his father would recover, Jonathan returns to the manor's library, leafing through well-thumbed volumes on linguistics, history, and so-such. It's been years since he's spent time reading here, he realizes. First there was Chichester and then Hugh Hudson, though the school collections dwarfed private ones, there was still a coziness to the manor library that he realizes he had missed. He had been thirteen, yes, when he started reading history outside of lessons. The familiar tomes are right where he left them, practically knee-level now.

Before, even if he climbed to the top of the ladder, he wouldn't have been able to reach the highest shelves. But now...

Struck with an urge, he rolls the stepladder over, climbing to the top. Brushing his fingers against the dusty top shelf brings a smile to his face.

"Mother," he whispers, "I've grown up now."
While laughing at himself for the display of sentimentality, he loses his footing and ends up knocking a crate of old books from the top shelf.

It's a box of account-books by the look of it, and there is a letter from Dio's father, Dario Brando, wedged between them. So this was the letter that had brought his cousin over, Jonathan thinks, blowing dust from the envelope. He still remembers how Dio had looked during their first meeting, still remembers being cowed in the other boy's presence. But it was clear that that had been an act.

Curiosity gets the better of him then -- with the rationalization that it had 'been seven years, after all', he opens the envelope and skims through the letter.

As Dio's father's handwriting is difficult to make out (for the y's, g's and p's all look the same to him), he moves to the table to examine the writing under better lighting.

An instinctive chill sets in then, when he reads and then rereads Dario Brando's listing of symptoms. Dio had never mentioned his father's symptoms. Considering it further, Jonathan realizes Dio never spoke of his father without prompting. And then he remembers the expression his cousin had the split second after Jonathan had used his aunt and uncle as an example of love overcoming circumstance. Dio often looked contemptuous (indeed, Pyrce had joked it was the other man's default expression) but at that moment, Jonathan could have sworn there was something deeper than contempt.

He takes a deep breath before standing up. If he voiced his thoughts aloud, he would call himself a liar. There is a logical explanation for this coincidence, of this, he is certain. All he needs to do is talk to Dio and his cousin will explain things and Jonathan will apologize for jumping to conclusions.

With this state of mind, he exits the library.

Dio is at the top of the stairway, bringing Father his medicine. There is a sleight of hand with the medicine packet, so subtle that Jonathan might have passed it off some other time. But right now, seeing Dio perform what seemed like a switch of medicine, kicks his suspicions into overdrive.

"Dio," he says, "Just now -- what did you do to Father's medicine?"

"Jojo," his cousin greets, looking surprised, "I thought you'd still be in the library. And what do you mean 'do with the medicine'? I'm bringing it up as usual."

"In the library," Jonathan begins anew, trying to rearrange his own thoughts, "I found this letter from your father. Father showed it to you, I think."

"Oh yes," Dio says, setting the tray down, "I remember that. But why are you bringing this up now?"

"The symptoms..." he stutters out, Shakily unfolding the letter, "They're the same. A pain in his heart, swollen fingers, and a cough that will not go away. He doesn't say anything about a fever either!"

"He was probably feverish when he was writing the letter," Dio drawls, "Look at that spelling, look at that handwriting. Do you really think that was all he was capable of?"

"Dio," Hopelessly, he tries to find the right words. "Why do you never talk about your father?"

"What do you mean? He died so long ago." His cousin looks hurt now, and Jonathan instinctively
recoils. "I confess I started to consider your father to be my own soon after."
"But you didn't... and the symptoms... and now father too."
"Jojo. What are you talking about?"
"Dio -- this medicine -- I need to have it examined."
He doesn't know what he's saying until Dio is stopping his hand.
He's just accused his cousin of plotting murder -- of plotting *his father's* murder.
Jonathan realizes it's crazy, that he's trying to throw out his father's medicine -- for what? A trick of light?
But something, something wicked but certain, nags at him and he presses forward.
"Dio," he says, in a voice that isn't his own, "As a gentleman, swear on your father's honor. Swear on Mr. Brando's honor that you're innocent." He can't believe what he's saying and clearly, neither can Dio. Still, he continues. "If you swear... I'll put this medicine back and we'll never speak of this again!"
How relieved he is -- and how guilty! -- when Dio does just that.
"If it means so much to you Jojo," his older cousin sighs, wearing the same expression he wore whenever Jonathan dragged them to the museums or the stables, "Then I swear, on the honor of my father, the late Dario Brando, that I am not trying to poison your father. I was not switching the medicine and, quite frankly, have no idea what you saw, but as this is the last dose of medicine for this week, I would implore you, for our father's sake, not to throw it away."
He steps forward, tugging the packet from Jonathan's fingers and placing it back on the tray.
"There," he says, "Are you satisfied?"
Dio's declaration brings Jonathan back to his senses.
The things he had just accused his cousin of! Without any proof, without any basis! He was the lowest of the low, suspicious of his own cousin, raised for seven years to be like his brother!
"I'm sorry," he stammers, staggering back, so overwhelmed with shame he wants to vomit. "I'm so sorry, Dio. I have no idea what came over me -- I, I just -- "
"Jojo," Dio soothes, forever understanding, forever patient, "You're stressed. It's understandable. Come, let's give Father his medicine together. Surely that would put your mind at ease."
Struck dumb by the weight of his own thoughtlessness, Jonathan mutely trails behind his cousin. Dio knocks on the door, Mr. Joestar says 'come in', and the two of them enter.
"My," the Viscount intones, "This is a surprise. How lucky I am, to have both my sons bringing me my medicine!"
Dio pulls up two chairs and carries a conversation with the Viscount. They talk of the harvest, the graduation ceremony, the winning rugby game, and the future.
"Jojo," his father remarks after a while, coughing into his hand, "You're awfully quiet tonight, is there something you want to say?"
"Oh, no," he makes a big show of stretching, "I'm just a little tired." He stands up, stooping down to kiss his father's cheek, before wishing both Dio and the Viscount a good night.

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Three days later and his father has recovered slightly. His hands have shrunken down and he no longer clutches at his chest. The cough, however, persists. He tries to take his classmates' advice, not dwelling on the bad things. He spends most of his time by his father's bedside, reading him the news and writing his letters.

One week after, however, and he finds himself shaken into consciousness by Dio.

"Jojo," his cousin hisses, forcing him to sit up, "Jojo, you need to wake up now!"

"Dio...?" Jonathan asks, rubbing his eyes, "What are you --"

"Get up, we need to hurry!"

"But --"

"Jojo." In the doorway, his cousin stops. He wears an alien expression, one that Jonathan will only later place as panic. "Father -- he's dying."

They clatter through the hallway and up the stairs. The butler says the reverend has been called for and Jonathan will not believe it -- cannot believe it.

"Father!" he shouts, running over and kneeling down. "Father, please, don't go! There's still so much I need to learn from you!"

"Jojo," the Viscount rasps, finally free of all ailments, "Your mother's ring... please get it."

There's a mad scrambling of drawers before the ring is found by Dio. He places it in Jonathan's hand and Jonathan slips it onto his father's pinky fingers, crying all the while.

"It's so small..." he continues, "I couldn't wear it on any other finger."

"Father," Jonathan urges, "Please hang on. The reverend... the doctor... they'll come. They'll come soon."

The Viscount shakes his head, smiling weakly.

"It is not so bad," he insists, "To die in the arms of your son."

Unable to speak, Jonathan shakes his head, clasping his father's hand tight.

"Dio. I'm sorry if you ever felt mistreated. I was happy... so happy... when you started calling me father. I shall see my dear sister in Heaven. Would you like me... to pass on a message?"

"Tell her --"

"Father, no!"

_Tell her sorry_, Dio does not say. Does not get the chance, for the Viscount passes with a sigh.

Jonathan gives a keening cry, more animal than man, and the sound rings and rings and does not stop, even after the reverend has come.
An Approach of Carrot and Stick
End of Part III: University (1886-1888)
In a defensive manner reminiscent of past sorrows, Jonathan retreats into himself. He feels like a spectator, the witness to a death, a narrator without voice -- unable to speak, unable to act. The reverend comes to give his father the last rites, and still, he cannot believe the other is dead. Is he still crying when the reverend leaves? He does not know for he can only see the church leader as he was, seven years prior, consoling him over the death of a girl and a dog.

It is Dio, always Dio, who accounts for his reaction.

Jonathan remembers being lead back to his room.

"Rest," his cousin commands, pressing his fingers to Jonathan's brow.

'How do you manage?' he wants to know 'How do you live after the loss of a parent?' But Dio is looking at him with the same hurt expression and so, the words catch in his throat. Does he give thanks? He hopes he does, he does not know how he would survive without Dio.

Who makes the arrangements for the funeral? It must be his cousin, aided by the servants, for Jonathan does not remember anything. In a daze, he haunts the hallways, lingering on every reminder of his father.

"Viscount," the butler calls, "Viscount Joestar," and his heart skips a beat. But his father is dead and he is the new owner of the title. It feels so heavy on his tongue, so alien against his ears. His father had been the perfect noble; he was a helpless child, all accusations and demands.

He is relieved then, when Duke Kensington arrives a day before the funeral, taking the burden of arrangements off of Dio's shoulders.

Somehow, he manages to wash up and dress himself on the day of the funeral. His limbs feel detached though his head is strangely clear. He has spent the last night laboring over a suitable eulogy.

"Jonathan Joestar," he tells himself in the mirror, frowning at his bloodshot eyes and oiled locks. "You are twenty years old. You will send your father off in a gentlemanly manner. This funeral is to honor the life he led, you are not to wallow in your own grief." Satisfied with his declaration, he says a quick prayer before going down to the parlor.

"Ah," Duke Kensington says, taking him by the shoulder and steering him in the direction of the dining room, "Your cousin was looking for you."

"Jojo," Dio greets, raising his eyebrows, "I see you've dressed yourself." He sets down his mug, walking over to touch Jonathan's forehead.

"Yes, well," he pauses, trying to find the words, "I can't have you dragging me to all funerals."

Dio makes a noise resembling a laugh, busying himself with adjusting Jonathan's tie. He smooths back the lapels too before stepping back and smiling.

"Here," he says, handing Jonathan the mug. "Cocoa."

"Oh. Thank you." He blows on it before drinking, and sighs at the familiar sweetness. Three gulps in and he removes the cup, eyebrows furrowing.
"What's the matter?"

"I don't know." He tentatively takes another sip. "There's a strange aftertaste."

"Give me that."

Obediently, he returns the mug to Dio, who sniffs at it before taking a sip himself.

"Oh," he says, "Our mugs must have been switched, sorry."

"You drink cocoa?"

"It's good for chasing off the taste of the tincture. Tonic, I mean."

"You've been taking a tonic?!" Jonathan demands, suddenly alarmed. He quickly touches Dio's forehead and cheeks, "Why? Are you sick?"

"No," and here, he looks somewhat uncomfortable, "It's... to calm the nerves. My advisor recommended it for exams. Sorry for the mix-up; I'll go get your portion." He sets the mug back down and goes to the kitchen.

In a strange way, Jonathan is almost relieved -- to know that his larger than life older cousin suffered from some of the same things as him. Perhaps he was more experienced with grief, what with losing his mother and father, but he clearly still felt it. If he could overcome his emotions, or at least compose himself in time for the funeral, then Jonathan should follow his lead.

"Here you go," Dio murmurs, passing him another mug. "The cooks must have mixed them up."

They stand in companionable silence for a couple minutes, sipping away.

"How do you feel?" Dio asks after finishing.

"Alright. I mean, I think there's a part of me that doesn't want to believe. Like with the Nile Expedition."

"But you've grown since then."

"Have I?"

"In bulk if not in mind," Dio teases, tugging Jonathan's ear. "Give me your mug, I'll take them back to the kitchen. I told Duke Kensington we'd both give a speech. You want to, don't you? Speak, I mean."

"Yes," Jonathan nods, "I've written it out."

"Good. Some of the others wanted to speak to you, you should find them. Accept their condolences and whatnot."

While Jonathan is listening to a chorus of 'I'm so sorry for your loss'-es, Dio heads to the kitchen, putting both mugs in the sink. Then he grabs a spoon and heads to the washroom, sticking it in his mouth and poking at his gag reflex until he vomits up all of the cocoa and most of his breakfast. He flushes the toilet and returns to the kitchen, tossing the spoon in the sink before downing a glass of water and some bread.
It speaks volumes for Jonathan's constitution, that he does not feel the effects of the tonic until after the late Viscount has been lowered into the ground and the guests have all left. Duke Kensington stays a while longer, noting that the Viscount's will needed to be read at a latter date. It was a matter of propriety of course, everyone knew what the terms were. Then he sees Jonathan's pained expression and delicately adds that the solicitor could wait.

"I'm glad you went after me," Dio remarks, after he has dragged Jonathan to the dinner table.

"Why's that?"

"It wouldn't do to cry."

"Hey! I cried after your speech."

"Yes, but you still managed to give yours. It was very good. I'm sure Father is proud."

"I still think Duke Kensington gave a better one," Jonathan argues, "Father would have enjoyed his, I never knew that they..." he trails off, clutching at his head. He's been ignoring it for the whole of the funeral, passing it off as grief, but the general sense of discomfort persists.

"Jojo? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I just... feel a little light-headed."

"Here," Dio urges, pressing his wineglass into Jonathan's hands, "Have a drink. It'll calm you down."

"If you say so..." Jonathan starts, closing his fingers around the flute and bringing it to his lips.

For half an hour, Dio is right. Although the lightheadedness does not go away, his head, at least, feels more firmly attached to his shoulders. He even manages to carry a conversation... something about the local church needing repairs. Then the moment passes and the uneasy sensation returns with a vengeance -- intensified, even, by the alcohol.

"Dio," he moans, resting his forehead against the table, "I feel -- unwell."

He can't remember, in sequential order at least, what happens next.

Had he stood up? Could he even stand? He must have, he supposes, for he's standing before the statue of the goddess of love soon after. She looks different from what he remembers. So much more... colorful.

Someone is saying something, but he can't make out the words. There is Dio, his cousin, moving his mouth. Jonathan laughs, because the other man looks like a mime, shouting wordlessly.

The mansion seems so alive, like the myriad paintings have come to life.

Perhaps he is dying. Perhaps the ascension to Heaven is a ridiculous parade. Who was it, he wonders, who had postulated the Almighty must have had a sense of humor? The church must have burned them, it's not a proper thing to say. But he can believe it, right now, trapped in this clearly fantastical world.

Is he still laughing? Is he still in the manor? At some point he sees the stars, so he supposes he is outside.
Somewhere in the sky -- or is it the ceiling? or the wall? -- is a Stone Mask. It's the same Stone Mask he studied, except much larger and, well, colorful. Like everything else. Its stone lips move and unlike his cousin, sound comes out of them.

Mother, he finds himself thinking.

Of course his mother's mask would sound like her.

"Wear me," the mask says, all made-up lips and cheeks and brows, "Wear me and you will meet your mother in the Kingdom of Heaven."

He has never met his mother before, he explains, and he is worried she will not like him. He has not solved yet the mystery of the mask, and he is so far from being a gentleman.

"Jojo," the mask says again, sounding like his father this time, "Jojo, I miss you."

If I wear the mask, he asks, will I go to Heaven?

"Yes."

Yes, yes, yes.

Dio's hands are on him now, or perhaps they always were and he has only just noticed. He looks at his cousin, who is strangely dull. But no, that can't be right. Dio is the center of attention, the height of fashion, the one who Jonathan owes the most to.

Oh, he thinks, as everything fits into place.

"Dio," he hears himself sing-song, "Dio, would you like to go to Heaven?"

What happens after that?

He does not know. Does not want to know.

When he wakes again, he is in a dark room, propped up against a slew of pillows. There is a single red candle: flickering. flickering!

He should be alarmed, he knows. How could a candle be red? Who would light one in his room? His father had already installed modern lighting.

He finds he is unable to avert his gaze.

On a whim, he wants to touch it.

Does he reach for it? Does he get up? Either way, he doesn't come close.

Sleep, the mask says. So he does.

The next time he opens his eyes, he finds his vision obscured by a cloth. When he reaches up to remove it, he discovers his right hand has been bandaged and its range of mobility is limited by the
brace on his wrist.

"Viscount! You're awake!" a maid exclaims. "Oh, thank heavens. Please wait there, I'll get your brother!" There's the sound of a tray being set down accompanied by the smell of hot tea and milk. Then there's the maid scurrying down the hallway, followed by a slamming of doors and hasty footsteps.

"Jojo!" Dio bursts into the room, "You woke up!"

"Dio," he makes another attempt to remove the blindfold, "What's the all about? Help me take this off, will you?"

"No, wait," the other man stills his hand, before gently helping him sit up. Deprived of his sight, Jonathan can only feel Dio's weight against the mattress.

"Jojo," Dio begins, voice strangely tremulous. Jonathan feels his cousin pet his hair and kiss his brow.

"Dio," he growls, "What are you -- "

"Be quiet. Be quiet and listen to me. Jojo," he repeats, "Jojo, you know -- you know I would never hate you, right?"

"Dio, please...!"

"Say yes."

"At least tell me what this is -- "

"Just say yes!"

Jonathan mumbles 'yes', more confused than ever. Dio seems mollified, touching both of Jonathan's cheeks before wrapping his arms about Jonathan's shoulders.

"And you know," he continues, "That there is nothing -- nothing -- you could do to make me hate you, right?"

Dutifully, Jonathan replies with another 'yes'.

"Alright then." Dio ends the embrace, pressing another kiss to his brow before removing the blindfold.

The flooding of midday winter light causes Jonathan to squint.

"Jojo," Dio urges, frantically clenching at Jonathan's left hand, "Jojo, this isn't your fault. You've suffered enough -- you weren't supposed to... this wasn't supposed to..."

He looks at Jonathan then, genuinely pleading, and Jonathan hears the pieces click into place.

"Dio," he chokes out, feeling as if someone had gutted him, "Dio, did I do that to you?"

"It was not your fault," Dio repeats, as if a lie said enough times would become truth. He gives a slew of excuses after: how he had mixed up the cocoa, how he should have made Jonathan vomit up the tonic, how he should have noticed Jonathan was unwell during the funeral, how he should not have given Jonathan wine. And throughout the litanies, all Jonathan can see are the bandages covering half his face.
"Jojo," Dio tries, fingers nervously clasping and unclasping about Jonathan's hand, "Jojo, if anything, this was my fault."

When did he let himself get like this?, he wonders. When did he become someone who couldn't take responsibility for their own actions -- who would put the blame on the victim? With every excuse spilling from Dio's lips -- Dio, who had sacrificed hand over fist for him -- Jonathan hates himself more. He had drunk a fourth of the cocoa, if that. Dio had drunk the rest and he hadn't nearly committed manslaughter.

Struck with his own inadequacy, he realizes his needs to see the extent of his crime.

"Dio," he interrupts, "Let me see."

"What?"

"The wound. Let me see the wound."

"Don't be ridiculous Jojo. I forgive you, because there's nothing to forgive, so please just -- "

"Dio!" he roars, pulling his hand away, "I'm not a child! You don't need to protect me! I am -- I am responsible for my actions and I want to see what I did!"

In response, Dio sets his jaw and steels his gaze.

"Please," he whispers, "I can't go on like this."

He can see the conflict in his cousin's eyes. Finally, his shoulders slump and he closes his eyes, reaching up to slowly undo the bandages.

When his wounds are out in the open, Jonathan reels back with a sob.

"Oh God. Dio, I'm so sorry. I'm so so so sorry." He kneels his head, openly crying.

"Come now Jojo," Dio sighs, petting his hair again, "It's not as bad as it looks. The doctor said it won't even scar. Do you want me to unwrap your hand too? I can promise you it's in a sorrier state." He stills his hand to redo the wrap, before pulling up his sleeve to wipe at Jonathan's cheeks. "Of course both are flesh wounds. We'll survive. In a couple months, there will be no trace of this."

And still, Jonathan cries.

After a while, Dio heaves a sigh, flexing and unflexing his fingers before reaching underneath his cousin's chin.

Jonathan shrieks and recoils, nearly gagging on his laughter.

"Dio!" he trills, rubbing at his eyes, "What was that for?!"

"That's better isn't it?" Dio asks, pinching his nose. "Don't dwell on these things Jojo. Everyone makes mistakes and this is my mistake."

"But -- !"

"Now that you're up, let me ring for the doctor. He wants to double-check the nerve endings on your hand or something."

"Dio," he calls, right as his cousin is about to leave.
"What?"

"I'm sorry. For this and, well, everything." Thinking of all the injustices, all the grief, he had inflicted on his cousin makes his chest clench up again.

"Jojo. What did I say about dwelling on it?" He pauses, considering, "If it's any consolation, I fared much worse. When my mother died, I mean."

How do you mean, Jonathan wants to ask, but Dio's already out the door. He slumps forward, clutching at the sheets. Grief was no excuse. Fully grown men, especially college-educated and from the nobility, should be held responsible for their actions.

Knowing what needed to be done, he rings for the maid to ring for the butler. The Joestar family butler, you see, could read and write.

- 

When Dio enters Jonathan's room again, he finds Jonathan seated upright.

"The doctor will be here in an hour or two."

"I see." Jonathan takes a deep breath before impressing his seal on the envelope.

"What's that?"

"A letter. Post it for me, will you? Please."

"Jojo," Dio's face falls when he sees the addressee, "Think of what Father said. He would have wanted --"

"I've been a child for too long," Jonathan interrupts, expression grim. "Thank you, Dio, truly, for shielding me for all these years. I'm sure I will continue to rely on you. But if I am to inherit the title, then... well. Now is the time to grow up."

"Won't you reconsider? Think of the opportunity."

"No. I won't."

Dio is making a lot of concessions lately, Jonathan notes. He distantly wonders if the grief and violence had intruded on his cousin's resolve.

"Alright then," he relents, "I'll have a servant run it to the postmaster."

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The doctor comes and goes, pronouncing that everything seemed in order and that Jonathan could take the bandages off after two weeks. He also confirms what Dio had said, that the cuts on his face likely wouldn't scar.

"Didn't I say so? Will you stop fussing now?"

"No. But I am relieved."

"I'll settle for that," Dio sighs, raising the spoon.

"Is this really necessary?" Jonathan whines.
"Tit for tat. I told you our positions would be reversed."

"Brat," Jonathan sniffs, sticking out his tongue.
Thinking back, he realizes he has always had a flair for the theatric, the unnecessary. He could have slit his father's throat and then watched the man bleed himself dry; no one would have come looking for him and everyone would have assumed it was the work of an unpaid creditor. But no, it was not enough to kill the man -- Dio needed to see him suffer.

The problem then, with his plots involving Jonathan, is that his end goal requires the other man to be in one piece, sound in mind and body. In that regard, his penchant for theatrics backfires horribly.

Not for the first time, he finds himself surprised and impressed by his cousin's adaptability. He must have gotten through the eulogy on willpower alone; even after vomiting up the spiked cocoa, Dio could still feel its effects. He had used a much larger dose of the tincture in Chichester, bribing one of the Lancaster boys to slip it into the Head's soup. There was no chance of death, the apothecary had reassured him, but every opportunity to play the fool. Not being in the same class, he hadn't born witness to the effects, but the rumors following his early departure that day spoke volumes.

That had been his plan for Jonathan: give him a small dose of the drug and have him make a scene at the funeral. He would then have witnesses that the other was unwell, clearly in no condition to depart to Mexico.

But his cousin had foiled his plans by staving off the worst of the drug for so long that Dio had needed alcohol as a catalyst. At that point, he had just wanted to see if there would be any effect. It had ended with both of them in bandages of course, what with Jonathan cutting his hand and trying to place the activated Stone Mask on Dio. It had only been dumb luck that the servants had been around, that the town doctor could be called.

Although the doctor suspects a drug at work, he is eventually swayed by Dio's recount -- that Jonathan had been tired, had been sleeping poorly for days, and he was not the sort to engage in those sort of pleasures! The doctor gives a diagnosis of hysteria brought about by grief, reassuring Dio that neither of them would scar, and asks to be called back once Jonathan woke up.

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This is another trick he had learned at Chichester. If someone is woken from the deepest lulls of sleep, they would experience a temporary immobility. So Dio does just that, lighting a candle on the dresser opposite the bed and waiting until Jonathan was dreaming. A brush of the eyelids is enough; he slips out of sight, watching the other man blink blearily at the candle.

So close. He is so close.

Stilling himself, he waits until Jonathan falls asleep again before snuffing out the candle and scraping the wax off of the dresser.

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He does the same the second night.

In the morning, he catches his cousin examining the top of the dresser.

"Is something wrong?" he asks, setting the breakfast tray down.
"No," Jonathan replies, after checking behind the mirror. "It's nothing."

Dio raises an eyebrow but does not pursue the subject. Jonathan returns to bed, where Dio feeds him sausages and potato mash.

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"Dio," Jonathan starts, after he's seen the flickering red candle for the fifth night in a row, "Do you ever have recurring dreams?"

"Recurring how?" he asks.

"Like... the same dream, over and over."

"No," he says, "I don't remember having any of those. But then, I don't normally remember my dreams." He stops, as if searching his memory, and adds: "I sometimes dream of Chichester. Having to write lines on Sunday, I mean."

"I see." Jonathan scrutinizes the papers before him, absent-mindedly flexing the fingers of his bandaged hand.

"Why the sudden question?" Dio asks, tugging the telegram from Jonathan's grasp. Skimming the transmission, he finds the Duke Kensington has arranged, in consideration of their ailments, for the late Viscount's solicitor to pay them a house call. The telegram says the lawyer would be arriving on Wednesday the 24th.

"It's nothing," Jonathan repeats, shaking his head.

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As promised, the solicitor from Norton Rose arrives on the 24th, bringing with him a listing of the accounts and properties owned by the late Viscount. Apparently the Viscount had changed his will after formally adopting Dio but made no amendments after that.

A small portion of the inheritance was earmarked for alms: the local chapel, the cathedral at Chichester, and the London church that had overseen the marriage of Dio's parents. A pair of mares along with a poetry collection was to be given to Duke Kensington. Various deposits of goodwill were also made to contacts in Gibraltar, Bombay, and Newfoundland. These were, the solicitor explains, advance payments in hope that these associates would help the new Viscount through the transition. Outside of those, the rest was to be divided between his two sons, with the title and estate passing to Jonathan. Dio, of course, was welcome to remain in the mansion, and he was given the choice of being buried in the Joestar family cemetery.

It is in this meticulousness that Jonathan sees his father's love. Indeed, Mr. Joestar had left nothing to chance, carefully penning down everything that needed to be done and which tasks required most expediency. The House of Lords have already been notified of the change in title; Jonathan takes the solicitor's advise to continue sending a representative. He would have little time to spend debating politics, what with the turned-over assets.

"What of you?" Jonathan asks, after the solicitor has left.

"What about me?"

"Will you go back to London?"
"Oh, I wrote to Coward Chance already. They had expected me to start in November but agreed to wait until January."

"January!" Jonathan repeats, eyes widening, "Why January? Surely your -- surely you'll be well before then."

Dio looks him in the eye, saying nothing.

"Dio, you shouldn't stay here because of me. You heard Sir Wright, Father has left so many people behind to help me."

"Don't be ridiculous Jojo," Dio drawls, "Without me, how would you eat?" And then he dodges a playful swing, ducking out of the office and up the stairs.

"Don't spend too much time with the accounts!" he calls from the first floor, "The numbers will make your head spin!"

But Jonathan is determined to fill his father's shoes -- if not now, then eventually. So he sits himself down at the desk, awkwardly moving books and papers around with one hand, before attempting to balance the accounts.

Numbers, numbers, numbers! He has no idea how his father kept track of them all without a secretary. There were so many tables and charts -- absolutes, minimums, before-and-after's, nets, and grosses. Some figures are clearly part of a larger group, but not all expenses were broken down. In trying to make sense of two and a half decades of gains and losses, he finds that the numbers and lines blurring, three years and fifteen pages in.

Upstairs in his room, with the door locked and the curtains drawn, Dio unwraps the package he had requested from London and the reason he had been unable to proceed. Jonathan's violent reaction to the tincture had drove a wedge in his plans, but he's determined to make use of the situation. His cousin clearly believed he was dreaming, a most logical conclusion. Why, the question begged, would anyone light a candle in a mansion that had electrical lighting? And six nights in a row!

As the Queen had declared make-up was suitable for actresses and prostitutes and no-one else, it was terribly unfashionable to be caught with it on. The product was thus neigh-impossible to obtain in the countryside shops.

He unwinds the bandages a second time, tilting his head this way and that. Then he uncaps the jar of facial powder, and applies it to the right side of his face, ignoring the stinging sensation from the irritated still-healing cuts. The color of the powder is two shades lighter than his skin, but he'll have to make do. Closing the jar and setting aside the brush, he tilts his head to the right, and then to the left.

"Hm," he muses, patting his right cheek, "That'll do."

He takes the brush and powder jar to the washroom, placing them both in the space behind the toilet's cistern, along with the dozen-odd candlesticks before washing the make-up off. Then he redoes the bandages, opening the curtains and unlocking the door.

- 

On the seventh night, exactly a week after the Viscount's funeral, Dio reveals himself to Jonathan. With his bandages removed and his cuts temporarily hidden, he lights a second red candle before touching the back of Jonathan's hand.
Dio watches, mildly amused at the variety of expressions running across Jonathan's face. How lucky his younger cousin was, he thinks again, to have him, Dio, on his side. The simpleton would be robbed blind and left to rot in the streets otherwise.

Jonathan's eyes are wide open. His nostrils flare, his fingers twitch, and his mouth struggles to make some noise. He can't, of course, Dio's made certain he can't speak or move, and for a moment, he's overwhelmed at how much power he has over the other.

I could do anything, he thinks, and so long as there are no traces, Jonathan would assume it was a dream.

Oh, but he wants to leave traces. To squeeze and scratch and mark, as if the imprint of his hand over Jonathan's wrist would be the same hold Jonathan had over his heart. He wants the other to remember this, to know that it was him.

He's brought out of the moment by Jonathan's trembling form. His cousin is scared, he realizes, reaching forward with a smile. Is his head inclined at the right angle? Is it obvious enough that the Dio of his dreams is not the real Dio? He does not know, but he brushes a couple stray curls back, ghosting his knuckles against Jonathan's cheek.

"Sleep," he says.

Eventually, Jonathan does.

The next afternoon, Dio knocks on the door to the study.

"Come in," Jonathan says while buried in another mountain of papers.

"I was wondering," Dio starts, "If you've seen a telegram from Coward Chance?"

"No. Why, is it missing?"

"I put it on my nightstand, but it's not there. So I thought the maids returned it to the study."

"No. I haven't seen it." Jonathan gets up, shuffling through the latest parcels. "Here, if it's so important, I'll help you look for it."

"There's no need. I can ask them to send it again."

"But that won't look good!" he protests, already beelining for the stairs, "Besides, I'm tired of sitting around adding and subtracting all day!"

And so, Dio allows himself to be led back to his room.

"Where did you see it last?" Jonathan asks, raising his eyebrows at the state of his cousin's room.

"On the left nightstand."

"And you say it's not important!"

"I doubt you'll fare better," Dio snorts, getting on his hands and knees to check underneath the bed.

"And you're sure it was there yesterday?"
"Considering I received it yesterday, yes."

"Alright then," Jonathan opens the handful of still-closed drawers, poking around. After he's worked his way through the dresser and the writing table, he pauses, adding, "Are you sure I can search through all your stuff?"

"Asking for permission after having done the deed?" Dio laughs, "That's not very gentlemanly, Jojo."

"Well it's just been clothes so far!"

"We've been living together for seven years," Dio drawls, "I doubt either of us have any secrets left to share."

"Um. Right." Jonathan opens the wardrobe doors then, coughing into his hand. He sighs in exasperation at the predictably-overflowing assortment of outfits. "I feel like you get more and more clothing each year. How do you have the time to wear them all?"

"Not everyone is satisfied with the same outfit year-round," Dio bites back, "And I still can't believe you planned to wear your Chichester uniform throughout university."

"Hey! You didn't wear any of your really outstanding clothes either!"

"Perhaps I did and you didn't notice."

With effort, Jonathan arches an eyebrow. Dio stares back with a straight face. Then they both burst out laughing.

"Father will be rolling in his grave..." Jonathan mutters, looking behind the wardrobe and headboard, "Look at us, grown men arguing over clothes!"

"Just because you have no taste --"

"Or I like walking without having to..." Jonathan pauses, walking over to lift the top of the wastebasket, "Oh, Dio. Is this it?"

"So it is," Dio says, taking the scrap of paper, "How did it get in there? Well, thank you Jojo."

"Back to the books I go," Jonathan sighs.

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Over the next couple nights, Dio slowly but surely progresses.

First it is his face, then his hands. He refrains from unbuttoning anything, but eventually does slip his hand underneath Jonathan's nightshirt, running the base of his palm against his cousin's waist. Under his touch, Jonathan shivers, trembles, and quakes. Sometimes, he tries to say something. Once, he manages to lift his right hand. Dio stops his carresses then, bringing the wrist to his lips.

In the light of three candles, Jonathan turns a most fetching red.

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Outside of the dreamscape, Jonathan is determinedly working his way through the accounts. Although he's beginning to understand the order behind the balances, he still finds the sheer multitude of numbers taxing.
The surreal nightmares are taking their toll on him as well. It must be a dream, he reasons, though he has no idea why. He would ask Dio, but he's too ashamed to disclose the details of the dream. Of this he is certain: he is a truly wicked person, to be dreaming of his cousin in such a manner.

"Jojo," Dio calls, knocking on the door of the study. He knocks a second time before pushing open the door only to find the other man sleeping at the desk. He walks over then, carding his fingers through his cousin's hair.

"Jojo," he repeats, "It's suppertime."

"Wha -- " Jonathan startles, sitting up suddenly. "Oh! Dio!" with his good hand, he rubs at his temples, "Dinner. Right. I'm sorry, I'll be there."

"Still untangling the numbers?" he asks, looking at the expanse of expenditures. "Couldn't you get someone else to do it?"

"No," Jonathan shakes his head, rising to his feet, "If I'm to manage the estate, I'll have to learn someday."

"Are you alright?" Dio asks, touching his cousin's shoulder and taking note of the minute recoil.

"Of course!" Jonathan replies, putting up a false front, "I'm only starving. Mmm, is that steak I smell? Come on, Dio, surely you're hungry too!"

"Jojo," Dio starts again, after he's cut Jonathan's steak into acceptable portions, "Are you still having those dreams?"

Jonathan freezes, slackened fingers allowing his fork to drop to the ground. Looking at Dio now -- even though he had bandages -- he can't help but remember. Except there is nothing to remember because everything is in his head.

"I don't know," he says, voice reaching a harpied pitch, "I've been -- " He screams then, because Dio tries to touch his forehead, backing up his chair and scrambling to his feet.

"Is something the matter?" one of the servants calls from the kitchen.

Jonathan fixes his cousin with a desperate glance, shaking his head for emphasis.

"We're alright," Dio calls back, bending over to pick up the fallen fork. "Actually, could you bring a spare fork?"

"Right away, sir!"

"What was that about?" Dio hisses, as Jonathan awkwardly sits back down.

"I... um. I was just spooked. Sorry." Jonathan laughs weakly, keeping his gaze glued to the plate. A maid comes with a second fork and the two of them continue eating.

"Jojo, if your sleep is so badly affected, you should speak to a doctor."

"A doctor?" Jonathan repeats. He flushes so hard that even his ears glow red. "No! I mean..." he bunches up the tablecloth, "I'm fine. It's not that bad, really."

"Do you want to tell me about them?" Dio offers, "Perhaps that would help."

"No," Jonathan is certain, "No, it wouldn't. Dio -- please. Could we drop this?"
There's a beat before Dio nods.

"Fine."

Jonathan visibly relaxes, downing his wine.

Like Pandora, like Orpheus, like Icarus, he cannot resist temptation.

He knows what he should do, knows how dangerous of a game he is playing. And still, he wants more.

That night, his hands are trembling while he's fastening Jonathan's limbs to the bedposts. He nearly knocks over a candle while passing the matchstick from wick to wick. Jonathan wakes when he puts the bit in his mouth, eyes still wide with fear and disbelief. For a while now, Dio has been tempted to say something appropriately dramatic. Knowing Jonathan though, his mind is filling in the gaps. Dio leans over him, kissing his cheek, his jaw, his collarbone. Then he rights himself, stepping to the side, before hooking his fingers around the pyjamas' waistband and pulling the garment down.

Jonathan whimpers, giving a muffled cry. Dio hushes him, dawdling across his thighs before pressing his palm against the prize.

Thinking back to Chichester, that cowardly son of an Earl whose choice in companionship had been his only redeeming quality -- he had known Dio's intentions better than anyone else.

Dio remembers raging at the peculiars of the faggot system, making Cross swear that he would keep Jonathan from becoming someone else's pet. With an obsession bordering on mania, he had dreamt of his cousin's corruption. How Cross would break his promise and turn a blind eye, or worse, join in himself. How Jonathan would confuse lust with love and pledge himself to the first person he slept with.

Thinking back, it had been ridiculous -- how eagerly he had stooped to murder so that Jonathan would room with him once more. How hawkish his gaze was about his cousin, how desperate he was to catch Jonathan in the act. It occupied an absurd amount of time, wondering how exactly Jonathan relieved himself. Did he do it in bed? In the showers? While seated or standing? Did he close his eyes? Would he still be thinking of that wretched girl?

Jonathan being Jonathan, Dio never does find out and ends up having to content himself with the knowledge that his cousin had no intention of striking up another romance.

And now Jonathan is before him, naked from the waist below, and Dio's fingers are wrapped about his flaccid cock. In a torturously slow fashion, he alternates between stroking and palming, sometimes teasing the foreskin with his thumb. Eventually the member gives a tell-tale twitch and only then does Dio look up. Jonathan's eyes are lidded, flickering like the four candles, and every couple strokes, he gives a weak roll of his hips.

Despite his plans, he's not able to drag the climax out, much less delay it indefinitely. Jonathan comes in less than a minute, all taut thighs, clenched stomach, heaving chest, and knocked-back head. His eyes are squeezed shut and his fists are clenched. Dio is fully hard, leaking, actually, and he wants nothing more than to rut against Jonathan and speckle his skin with come. He withholds of course, taking out a handkerchief to clean the other up. He licks his hand clean before pulling up Jonathan's pyjamas and walking over to his head.
"Sleep now," he says, covering Jonathan's already-closed eyes with his hand.

Jonathan had come so quick, and was back asleep so soon afterwards, Dio wants to believe this is his first time.

He knows it's impossible, that not even Jonathan was so inhibited, but he nonetheless finishes himself off in the act of believing.
Although their time spent together results in Dio considering Jonathan to be an extension of himself, he realizes that he still does not know the other enough to fully account for his reactions. It is ironic, he'll think later, when he's the happiest he'll ever be, that the one standing at the end of his plots and schemes possessed such a preternatural immunity to them. But this is, in retrospect, because his actions are severely limited around Jonathan. He cannot hurt or maim him, to say nothing of killing him, and more than anything, he needs to keep the other man in the dark.

And so he wakes on the morning of All Hallows' Eve with a pleasant tingle that creeps from his neck down to his fingers and toes. He throws his sheets to the side, staring at his hands. Last night, he had done it. He had touched Jonathan -- made him come, even. He raises both hands to his face, inhaling, before getting up and dressing himself.

While waiting for Jonathan at the dining table, he contemplates future nights. The doctor had already removed his bandages and it was only a matter of time before he would have no use for the facial powder. How would he continue to distinguish between the Dio of the dreamscape and himself? Should he invent another pretense for Jonathan to search his room? How eager his cousin had been, he remembers, and how relieved as well! For Jonathan had been looking, however subconsciously, for some sign, some clue: a candlestick, a horse's bit, a strand of rope. There was nothing for him to find; there will never be anything for him to find.

He smiles in anticipation, spearing a chunk of sausage.

By the time he's done with breakfast, it's half past ten and Jonathan has yet to arrive.

"Where is my brother?" he demands, wiping at his mouth.

"The Viscount has yet to leave his room," the butler replies. "Shall I go fetch him?"

"No need," Dio replies, standing up. "I'll see what's keeping him."

There is a wickedness in him, he recognizes, that makes him want to see Jonathan's reaction. Had he been affected as much as he, Dio, had? Would he eventually begin to blur the two Dio's? He imagines Jonathan will be buried under a pile of pillows and sheets, as he tended to do when sulking. It was really rather endearing, how predictable his cousin was when upset.

"Jojo?" he asks, knocking at door. "Jojo, are you awake yet?"

Receiving no answer, he knocks harder. "Jojo, I'm coming in."

Without meaning to, Jonathan makes him eat his words. Dio finds that his cousin is not buried under a pile of pillows and sheets -- is not in the bed at all. His gaze swivels across the empty room, landing on the billowing curtains. He pulls them back to reveal Jonathan, huddled at the edge of the balcony while still dressed in his nightclothes.

"Jojo!" Dio hollers, dashing out and dragging the other man back in, "What were you doing out there?! And dressed like that!" he touches Jonathan's forehead and, sure enough, there's the onset of a fever. Though it has yet to snow, mornings tended to be below freezing. While he's shouting for the servants and pushing his incoherent cousin back into bed, his mind races, trying to calculate how long he could have stayed out there. He had left Jonathan's room no later than two in the morning. At that point, he had definitely been asleep. How long could he have stayed out there?
Dio reaches under the sheets, wrapping his fingers around Jonathan's good hand, and sighs in relief. It's not frostbitten, at least.

"Master Dio! What's the -- oh heavens! What happened to the Viscount?"

"My brother thought to make himself a snowman," Dio drawls, "Fetch me some soup and tonic, will you? And hot water. A bucket of it for his feet."

"Right away, Sir!"

"And towels too! Hurry!" He turns back to Jonathan, whose teeth are still chattering, and presses a palm to the back of his neck. "What were you thinking?" he demands.

Three maids scurry in with the requested items. When his feet are submerged in hot water, Jonathan blinks, as if waking from a dream. Wildly, his gaze staggers from the maids to Dio, and he squeezes his eyes shut, leaning back against the bed with a groan.

"Butler!" Dio calls, "Help me get this idiot into a dry pair of clothes. Girls, thank you. You're excused."

Jonathan puts up an awful fight, kicking and thrashing like a man possessed. They end up having to cut the wet clothing off of him. Dio tries as best he can: speaking softly and using a soothing tone, but he's barely keeping calm himself. It is the butler who tosses the dry set of nightclothes to the side, running into the bathroom and getting a robe. A single piece is much easier and Jonathan calms considerably after that.

"The tonic," he snaps, "And a glass of warm water."

"Right away, Sir!"

"Jojo," he tries again when they're alone, "Jojo, what's wrong?"

"Master Dio, the tonic."

"Thank you. Here, help me sit him up." Jonathan is babbling a string of 'I don't want to's, biting down on his bottom lip and refusing to drink the water.

"Jojo, open your mouth."

Like the brat he is, Jonathan shakes his head, whining.

"Master Dio, if I may?" There is something to be said for familiarity, Dio acknowledges, for the butler is the same one who carried Jonathan about when he was still in dresses. He squeezes the young man's cheeks with one hand before tipping the glass to his lips. With remarkable ease, Jonathan begins to drink at the water.

"He likes to be coddled when ill," the old man explains, making the same series of motions with the spoonful of tonic.

"...Thank you."

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"Please do."

While waiting for the doctor, Dio tries desperately to make Jonathan more comfortable. He throws
off the wet sheets and rearranges the pillows, repeatedly reassuring both of them that everything would be alright. Later, he'll admit that he could stand to learn something from Jonathan when sickbed manners were concerned: as any nurse knew, the temperament of the patient was far more important than the temperament of the illness.

As it is, Jonathan moves to either sit or stand up.

"Rest," Dio urges, pushing at his forehead.

"My head hurts," Jonathan rasps, the most of a sentence he's formed.

"The doctor will be coming soon," Dio promises, "Just -- just wait."

With a ghastly lurch, Jonathan forces himself forward, vomiting up the remnants of dinner as well as the water and tonic. The smell alone is enough for Dio to want to do the same.

"Maid!" Dio screams again, "Maid!"

Thankfully, Jonathan keeps from dirtying the robe. The butler has already left for the doctor's and Dio does not think he can make his cousin change clothes a second time. When the maids clear away another bundle of sheets, Jonathan seems to clear up. Long enough to see his reflection in the dresser mirror and scream, at least.

"Go away!" he cries, covering his eyes, "Make it go away!"

"The mirror," Dio orders, "Take it away."

Do the servants think him mad? Perhaps, but they'll think him no worse than Jonathan, at least. The removal of the mirror is not enough however and he ends up having to carry-slash-drag his cousin into his own room. How does he manage the feat, without even the butler to help? The maids were absolutely no good and Jonathan was even worse. Still, he manages, and Jonathan calms considerably when he's in readjusted in Dio's bed.

After what feels like days but can't be more than two hours, the butler returns with the doctor in-tow. The first thing the doctor does is unwrap the bandages on Jonathan's hand. He breathes a sigh of relief right after, noting that while they needed to be changed (as they had gotten wet), the wound was still healing nicely and the fever was not, as he had feared, the result of an infection. It was likely because of the cold, he concludes, after Dio explains how Jonathan had been found on the balcony. Jonathan is prescribed three days of bedrest, laudanum for his headache, and a hot water bottle for his hands and feet.

When the doctor leaves, Dio orders the hearth in his room to be stoked and some light dishes to be brought up.

"Jojo," he breathes, combing his cousin's hair, "You need to to sleep."

The laudanum has loosened Jonathan's tongue considerably: he vehemently shakes his head, adding, "I'm scared to sleep. There are nightmares that I can't stop." He looks at Dio then, eyes brimming with unshed tears, "Dio," he begs, "What did I do wrong? Why am I dreaming of these things?"

"Nothing," Dio reassures, petting his hair and kissing his brow, "You did nothing wrong. Don't be scared, I'll stay with you."

"Please keep me from sleeping Dio," Jonathan cries. "Please."
"Jojo," his voice falters, "I can't do that. You need to sleep so that you'll recover." Jonathan's mouth quivers, and Dio tries to sweeten the deal: "How about this, I will stay awake. And once you're having a nightmare, I will wake you up. Is that acceptable?"

The way Jonathan looks at him then, Dio is suddenly reminded of the fourteen-year-old boy who feared the devil could speak to him.

"Promise?" he whispers, in a voice far too small for his stature.

Dio shoves his demons out of the way, clasping his cousin's hand and smiling.

"Promise," he repeats.

Jonathan smiles back, lightly squeezing Dio's hand, before closing his eyes. His breath evens out within minutes.

With both his hands clasped about Jonathan, Dio is struck, for the first time in his life, with the realization that his father's selfishness lived on in him. He had been close, so close, to destroying his cousin in his pursuit of lust. And for what? An illicit and unwanted midnight rendezvous? The knowledge that he could make Jonathan come undone by invoking a physiological response? He can taste bile -- knowing he was the reason for Jonathan's fever.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Jonathan's wrist, "Jojo, I'm so sorry."

For three days, Jonathan stays in Dio's bed. It goes without saying that the nightmares leave him be. While there is more than enough room on the mattress, his cousin insists on keeping awake. On the third day, Jonathan wakes with a much clearer head and, after seeing Dio dozing while squeezed between the two armchairs, quickly and quietly excuses himself.

The problem then, is that the wicked dreams begin anew as soon as he is in his own bed. They last longer and are more explicit, and Jonathan finds himself waking with an erection more often than not. The Dio of his dreams is now indistinguishable from the Dio of the real world and, after his own wrappings are removed, he finds himself actively participating in said dreams.

This is his problem, he fully understands. And it is a problem of the mind, if not the soul. Ignore it, suppress it, control it, reject it, becomes his new mantra. Refusing himself release is an easy enough task, a year and a half of rugby practice meant he was used to making do without hot showers. But being in constant contact with Dio... well, that proves to be more difficult.

His mantra becomes his downfall: in fervently trying to not concentrate on the other, he ends up noticing more. More than he had before, at least. Physical things -- characteristics which should have been mentioned in afterthought, if they were worthy of attention at all. Like how Dio's eyes seemed to change color at times, oscillating between ochre and amber, how he liked to hide his smiles behind books, how brilliant his golden hair seemed in the winter sun.

(Like how he had no qualms walking around in a bathrobe, and a loosely-tied one at that!)

"Oh, Dio," Jonathan stammers, "I, uh..." he jerks his head to examine the nearest bookshelf -- "I forgot what I wanted." -- before turning on his heel and nearly walking into the doorframe in his haste to exit the library.)
And Jonathan is horrified to discover that he does, or at least, has begun to, consider his cousin attractive.

Had he always felt this way? Surely not. He would be hard-pressed to describe Dio's physical characteristics from boyhood outside of "blond hair" and "always frowning". Even at Chichester and Hugh Hudson, when there had been plenty of opportunities to get an eyeful after sporting events, the thought had never crossed his mind! He tries to backpedal to those days -- what had been different? What had changed? Was it just that they were growing up?

Perhaps he is a homosexual, he thinks. It would certainly explain how he never felt any attraction to the dozen or so young women whose mothers had pressed him for a dance. Had he been shocked into it by the premature death of Miss Pendleton? It would make sense, in a roundabout way. If he were attracted to men, then his sudden attraction could be explained by his newly awakened sexuality and not, say, a more dire perversion.

So he gathers up his courage, tagging along with Dio on one of his London trips. They say hello to their old coursemates -- Pyrce and Murray are still at Hugh Hudson -- and Kensington accosts them over afternoon tea, dragging them to a practice match. He finds himself thankful for the forced cold showers. In the locker room surrounded by the other Chesters, all men and all with an impressive physique, it is still as if a stagelight has been cast on his cousin.

He should be relieved, he knows, to safely conclude that he was not attracted to men in general. But dream of Dio in such a way! They were cousins brought up to be brothers!

Another night is spent tossing and turning, and still, he continues to dream of Dio -- Dio, Dio, Dio. He greets the new day with the now-familiar duality of disgust and arousal.

And so it is Jonathan concludes that he is horrible, simply horrible. He suspects he had suppressed these feelings all along and it was only after the death of his father that his subconscious allowed for him to dream. It would certainly explain the timing of the nightmares.

Of this he is certain: there is no chance he will act on his urges.

He practices smiling before the washroom mirror then, trying to find the movements that seemed natural. How had he acted towards Dio before this? Around his cousin, he had never needed to think of propriety! It was one of the reasons he preferred Dio's company, because they knew each other so well and Dio... Dio had always understood him without judging.

That he has repaid this kindness with a misaimed and inappropriate attraction...

"Jonathan Joestar," he says to his reflection, "You are a grown man. You are a Viscount, even if you don't feel or look the part. Problems of the mind must be conquered in the mind!" He says a quick prayer, begging his parents for forgiveness -- begging Dio's parents for forgiveness -- and hopes against hope that those in Heaven were not able to see his thoughts.

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After a month of giving Jonathan a wide berth, Dio is at the end of his rope.

He is at fault, he knows, but knowing does little to ease the pain. He should have been happy with before -- and hadn't he? Hadn't he always said companionship would be enough? Jonathan only had eyes for him, why couldn't he have been content with that?

After recovering from his fever, Jonathan acquires a skittishness that Dio cannot get rid of. They used to be so close before: stealing food from each other's plates; pinching ears, noses, and cheeks;
reading plays in ridiculous falsettos; trying to sneak salt in and out of shared dishes.

Now, Jonathan cannot even look him in the eye and the most time they get together is at the dinner table.

His hopes had been raised with the impromptu London trip -- Jonathan had chattered enthusiastically about seeing their coursemates again, at least. And they had tag-teamed well in the mock rugby match. Had he been reminded of the dreamscape in the showers? Or was it over dinner? Either way, the situation had regressed and Jonathan chose to sit on the opposite side of the carriage for the ride back home.

There are things Dio notices, after years of hawk-eyed watchfulness: how Jonathan's left cheek twitches in a fake smile, how he looks away when lying, how his laugh first catches and then peters off when he's trying to make light of the dark.

With the end of November marks the first snowfall of winter. When Dio wakes to a pure white landscape, he gathers his resolve and knocks on the study's door.

"A ride?" Jonathan asks, raising his eyebrows. "On a horse?"

"I think we both could do with some fresh air," Dio explains, trying hard to feign nonchalance. "Come, Jojo, surely the untouched snow tempts you?"

Jonathan looks from Dio to his papers, purses his lips and then swallows. For a moment, Dio thinks the other will give some flimsy excuse, needing to balance tables and the so-such.

"Sure," Jonathan says instead, left cheek twitching minutely, "Thanks, Dio, I could do with some fresh air."

"Meet me at the stables when you're ready."

"I missed this, you know?" Dio starts, when the mansion has disappeared behind a hill. "We haven't spent time together for a while."

"I missed it too," Jonathan agrees. Then he laughs, "I'm surprised you're not sick of me yet -- aren't I always getting you into trouble?"

"You were grieving," Dio repeats, "Don't hold yourself to impossible standards."

As Jonathan has no response, he keeps quiet, and they trot in silence for a couple minutes. Dio reins in his horse shortly after, turning his head to observe the matching pair of tracks.

"Dio?"

"We've come so far," he muses.

"And we've still a fair way to go," Jonathan adds though he too stills his mount.

In the continued silence, Jonathan shifts his weight. Dio decides to bite the bullet.

"Jojo," he starts, "I have reason to believe that I am responsible for the... recent complications in our friendship. I want to reiterate that I value -- "
Had he been planning on confessing? And if so, to what extent?

He does not find out for Jonathan cuts him off with a high-pitched laugh that starts as a chuckle but escalates into a gasping, wheezing cackle. It is so jarring, Dio thinks, for he had not thought his cousin capable of those sounds -- nor that expression.

"No Dio," Jonathan says, when he's calmed the laughter and is wiping tears from his eyes, "It's all my fault and none of yours."

"That's -- "

"Dio," Jojo interrupts, smiling a broken smile, "You think too highly of me. I'm not as moral as you think I am."

"So tell me what you're thinking," Dio presses, "And let me judge for myself."

Jonathan shakes his head. "I -- " he swallows, adjusting the reins so the horse turned around, "I need to get back. There are -- papers."

He clicks his heels, forcing his horse into a sprint.

Dio has no chance of catching up, but he tries all the same. By the time the stable is in sight again, Jonathan's already tacked up his horse.

"Jojo!" Dio calls, upon re-entering the mansion. He sheds his cap and coat and gloves and boots, calling again: "Jojo, where are you?"

"If you're looking for the Viscount," the maid in-charge of washing volunteers, "He asked for cocoa to be sent to his room."

"Make that two cups," Dio orders. "And some cakes. I'll bring it up."

He barges into Jonathan's room without knocking, intent on using the element of surprise. He is surprised himself then, to see his cousin kneeled upon the floor with his hands clasped in prayer.

"Oh!" Jonathan exclaims, snapping his head. His eyes are puffy and red and he turns away immediately, leaping onto the bed and crawling underneath the blankets.

"Jojo -- "

"Go away!" Jonathan pauses, as the mass of sheets shuffles this way and that. "I'm sorry Dio, I'm out of sorts right now."

"No," Dio says, setting down the tray before locking the door. "I won't leave until you tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong!"

"Then why are you acting like this?"

"Because I'm tired," Jonathan sticks his head out, glaring as best he can, "Why can't you understand that?"

"So tell me why," Dio presses, getting on the bed and trying to wrench the blankets away. Naturally, Jonathan holds on tight. "And then I can help you!"
"There's nothing to help with!"

"Then don't be like this!"

"You think I want this?" At some point, Dio's thrown the blankets off and they're openly grappling on the bed.

"You're making a good show of it!"

"Take that back!" Jonathan demands, turning the tables and pinning Dio's shoulders, "Take that back!"

"Jojo. Jojo, you -- "

"There is nothing -- nothing -- I want more than to go back!"

"Go back to what?!"

"To before!" Jonathan's shoulders hunch as he wets his lips. Dio is not looking at him however, and when he follows his cousin's gaze...

His ears turn red in record time as he frantically rolls off, scrambling to get up, up, away.

"Is that," Dio tries, voice hoarse with disbelief, "What this is about?"

Struck dumb once more, Jonathan shakes his head.

"Don't look," he begs, "Dio -- please -- don't look."

"Jojo, you -- "

What expression had he been wearing? How had he left? Had he been forced out? Dio blinks once, and then finds himself standing in the hallway, before Jonathan's now-locked door. He raises his trembling hands to his face, grasping at the corners.

Yes, the touch confirms, yes this was real.

He takes a deep, steadying breath before turning heel.

"Master Dio!" the butler exclaims, "I heard a huge row! Are you alright?"

"Not at the moment," Dio admits, "But I will be."
It is Jonathan, always and only Jonathan, who can throw Dio's plans into disarray and have him plotting afresh in the aftermath.

Following their confrontation, Dio paces. First around his room, then throughout the second floor hallways, and then in front of Jonathan's door. By the time his senses have returned, he has it planned out perfectly, has even rehearsed what to say! So he tries the door and, finding it unlocked, throws it open.

"Jojo -- " he says, and nothing else. For Jonathan is not in his room. He pulls back the balcony curtains, checks underneath the bed, and even peeks into the washroom. But Jonathan is nowhere to be found. His heartbeat quickens as he curses himself. He shouldn't have wasted time with plots, he should have just set the ball rolling.

"The Viscount?" the butler repeats when asked, "No, I haven't seen him. Didn't he retire to his room?"

"Nevermind," Dio mutters, brushing past the servant. He pulls his riding gear back on, hurrying out to the stables. Seeing an empty stall only confirms his fears. He curses again, saddling up the same horse while ignoring its irritated nicker. Although it's half past five, the shadows have already set in. So he heads back to the manor, slipping in through the servants' quarters, and nicks a lantern and some matches.

The still-falling snow has covered up their tracks from the morning. More than that, it has covered up Jonathan's later tracks.

Perhaps, Dio reasons, his cousin had gone to clear his head. But then he remembers Jonathan, huddled so pathetically on the balcony, and swings himself onto the horse, kicking his heels to force it into a sprint.

-  

"Ah, Viscount," the butler greets upon entering the attic, "What are you doing up here?"

Jonathan rubs at his eyes before turning around.

"Nothing much," he admits, "I just wanted to clear my head."

"Your brother was looking for you," the old man offers, "I believe he wished to make amends."

"No," Jonathan shakes his head, "I was in the wrong, then."

"I'm sure you will be forgiven," the butler reassures, "I still remember when you were a boy, Viscount. How tightly you clutched onto your father and dog."

"Have I gotten better?" Jonathan asks, honestly curious.

"But of course!" the butler rests a hand on his shoulder, "Your father used to worry on how poorly you'd take the dog's death. It's natural, you must know, for owners to outlive their pets."
"I know," Jonathan nods, "Thank you."

With his mind set, he starts for the stairs.

"Master Dio?" the maid asks, "No, I haven't seen him. Have you tried his room? Or the library?"

"I've tried both," Jonathan replies, looking at the grandfather clock. It was a quarter to seven. "It's almost time for supper, really!"

"Are you looking for Master Dio?" one of the cooks asks, poking his head out of the kitchen.

"Yes! Have you seen him?"

"It was hours ago -- I was giving the horses their oats and I saw him riding off. He's not back yet?"

"No," Jonathan frowns, feeling a cold chill, "No, he's not."

"I can't imagine he'd still be outside," the maid titters, "It's already dark."

Jonathan hurries out the door and into the stables, only to have his fears confirmed. Dio's normal steed was missing.

"Sorry," he apologizes, stroking the snout of his favorite mare, "But I'm in need of your strength."

The horse whinneys, taking a mouthful of his hair.

"Viscount!" the butler calls, dashing out into the cold, "What are you doing?! Setting out at this hour!"

"It seems like Dio has not returned from his ride," Jonathan explains, pulling on his own riding boots, "I fear he's gotten lost."

"But you've just recovered! Take a carriage at least!"

"No, no. I ought to find him myself." He tugs on his cap, adding: "You should get back indoors, this snow can't be good for your bones."

"My bones!" the butler laughs, "With the row you two had, I would worry more for my heart!" He thrusts his own lantern into Jonathan's hands, "Take this then, or do you mean to search for your brother while blind?"

"Thank you," Jonathan says, smiling. He opens the stall gate, leading the mare out, and swings himself on at the entrance to the stables.

"Come back safely!" the butler calls.

"I will!" Jonathan shouts back, disappearing into the night.

Outside of the lantern, he is completely unprepared. He should have brought a timepiece, to say nothing of bandages, hot water, and warm food. But the thought of Dio hopelessly lost in the dark, or worse, sprawled out at the bottom of a ravine, make it impossible to turn back. Every dozen meters he hollers for the other, having his horse bank left and then right.

The cook said that Dio had left hours ago. But Dio disliked riding -- he only ever rode when Jonathan begged him to come along -- so why would he head out a second time? Jonathan cannot
answer this and, as he progresses further and further into the night, the sense of unease only grows. There were no wolves in this part of the countryside, hadn't been for decades. An odd fox or extremely lost deer was the most one could see during the winter months.

He stops the horse to stick the lantern out, but its tiny light only shines upon tree trunks.

"Dio!" he calls again, watching his breath fade into the night. His throat is hoarse and his chest hurts; he can only imagine how exhausted his cousin must be.

"Dio!"

He turns back and tries a different direction, running a back-and-forth through the snow-covered countryside with only the manor's lights as a guidepost.

After seeing the manor on the horizon seven times, his horse begins to slow down.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, leaning forward to pet her mane, "Just help me find Dio and I'll -- I'll give you sugared carrots tomorrow!"

Although it's ridiculous, the mare seems to understand something, for she gives another loud whinney before galloping forward. Out of ideas and short on voice, Jonathan loosens his hold on the reins, allowing the animal to lead the way.

After a couple minutes at a breakneck speed, the mare slows to a canter and, sure enough, Jonathan can see another light.

"Dio!" he shouts, "Dio!"

"Jojo!" -- he's never been more happy to hear.

Like ships in the night, how close they been to passing one another!

"What are you doing out here?" he demands, relief bleeding into concern, "And at this hour!"

"I should be the one asking that!" Dio shouts back, as their horses nicker in greeting, "Do you have any idea how long I've been looking?!" He thrusts his lantern into Jonathan's face to show the candle was more than half melted.

"But -- " Jonathan splutters, "That can't be right! I've been looking for you!"

On the way back, they lay out their misunderstandings. Unbeknownst to Dio, one of the other nobles had requested a horse for a casual race which explained the empty stall. If he spent more time in the stables, Jonathan chides, then he would have known.

The servants descend upon them like vultures once the horses breach the entrance, tearing off their wet garments, and rousing the stableboy to deal with their steeds.

This is how it should be, Jonathan thinks, sharing a fraternal smile with Dio before they're pulled apart and shoved into their respective washrooms, and he was a fool to see more.

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When Dio steps out of the washroom with water still dripping from his hair, he makes a beeline for the kitchen. As his earlier attempt of cocoa and cakes had failed, he orders a serving cart to be loaded up with a proper dinner and announces that he and his brother would be dining in their rooms.
"Jojo."

"Ah! Come in!"

Dio opens the door to push in the well-stocked trolley and Jonathan raises his eyebrows.

"I thought we could have supper upstairs," Dio explains, pulling the coffee table over to the hearth.

"Oh, let me help with that," Jonathan offers.

Within minutes, the table is set.

"This looks familiar," Jonathan snickers, taking his seat.

"The difference of course," Dio snipes, "is that our plates aren't empty this time."

"It was hard enough sneaking a whole picnic basket out of the kitchen. Besides, you should have eaten before."

"I can't believe you expected to learn table manners without the food..."

"Hey! I managed, didn't I?" Of course Jonathan says this while gravy dribbles from his chin. Instinctively, Dio tries to wipe at it with his napkin; just as instinctively, Jonathan flinches.

"Sorry," Dio mutters, pulling back.

"No, no," Jonathan stiffly laughs, dabbing at the spot with his own cloth, "I'm the one who should be sorry."

Had been and should be's hang in the air and they finish dinner while settled in a permeable silence. Neither of them make any move to speak, even after they've cleared the table. And then, while Jonathan is sipping at another mug of cocoa and Dio is nursing a brandy, they start -- and stop -- at the same time.

"You first."

"No, I'm..." he struggles for the right words, "more interested in what you have to say."

Jonathan looks uncertain, to say the least. He fiddles with the tassels on the sham, darting his eyes from Dio to the fire and then back again.

"Dio. I..." he looks at Dio's state of dress and falters, flushing pink, "I think of you as my brother, really. I know my prior actions were improper and I am prepared to make amends for them. I meant it when I said I wanted us to go back to... to how we were then, and I promise I will not -- "

"Jojo," Dio interrupts, "It sounds like you've done a lot of thinking."

"Well I -- "

"Well I've been thinking too," he stands up and takes Jonathan by the hand, leading him over to the bed.

"And?" Jonathan asks, glancing uneasily at the mattress.

"And I've decided," Dio concludes, "that I need you more than I need propriety or normalcy or -- "
"Don't!" Jonathan cuts him off, pulling his hand away to cover his ears, "Dio, you don't know what you're saying! Don't say that, please. We're not supposed to, you're not supposed to -- "

"I know," Dio murmurs, wrapping his hands around Jonathan's wrists, "I know, and I don't care." With one knee pressed into the bed, he leans forward so that their foreheads are touching. Jonathan is looking right at him for the first time in weeks. He closes the distance slightly, moving so that their noses touched too.

"Dio," Jonathan pleads, eyes wide and face glowing, "Dio, please."

"Of this I am certain," he says, as if there were a singular truth, "There is no one I care for more."

Something overflows in Jonathan then, starting in his chest and pooling up and out and over. His ears are ringing and he sees his own starry-expression in his cousin's eyes. With a sigh, he lets go of his inhibitions, tilting his chin up and going for a kiss. It's the lightest of touches, so brief they're both wondering what happened. As he closes his eyes, Dio feels a warmth settle into his stomach.

"Again," he demands.

Jonathan complies, and their second kiss lasts seconds longer.

"Again."

Somewhere between the third and tenth kiss, Dio opens his mouth only to have Jonathan twine their tongues. He is biting against Jonathan's bottom lip; Jonathan is moaning into his mouth; and their hands are roaming, roaming still.

There is nothing quite like it: to love and to be loved. Dio can tell he's sinking into Jonathan's lap, can feel Jonathan's arousal pressed against his knee, and then they're tumbling and rolling from one end of the bed to the other. If there's a blessing to be had from their impromptu riding session, it's that they're both underdressed -- clad in a bathrobe and nightclothes respectively.

"I love you," Jonathan says, kissing him anew. Dio is on his back, trapped in a cage of arms and legs, and he wraps his arms around Jonathan's neck, pulling him closer and closer still.

Dio chuckles when Jonathan wraps his fingers around his cock -- to think his cousin would cut straight to the chase. He knows he won't last long, not after years of holding back, but he doesn't care.

Doesn't care, for there will be a next time.

"Jojo," he breathes, canting his hips and sliding his arms down, "Jojo, shift your -- yes. Yes, like that."

Jonathan groans, pressing their foreheads together, while Dio helps him grasp both their members.

"Dio," Jonathan sighs, eyes fluttering shut, "Dio, Dio, Dio."

Jonathan's voice calling his name like that -- that alone is enough to send him over the edge. His cousin follows soon after, collapsing on top of him, and they are a wretched tangle of sweat-covered torsos and limbs. He should get up, he knows, get up and look for a handkerchief and clean them up. He only manages to pull the duvet over both of their legs before succumbing to a boneless mess.
He wraps an arm about Jonathan's waist then, closing his eyes to concentrate on breathing. They even out around the same time, and Dio opens his eyes when he feels Jonathan shifting, resting his head on his chest.

Jonathan's hand is drifting towards his face, brushing over his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, his lips. Dio closes his eyes again, savouring the touch.

And then he hears the other man sigh, and while it is neither long nor loud, it is a sorrowful sound nonetheless.

Of course Jojo would suffer from post-coital sadness, Dio thinks. Of course he would stress over consequences after the deed.

'No, Jojo,' he's already rehearsed, 'While this is not normal, it is also not a sin. For if either of us were the other sex, we would surely be betrothed.'

"Do you think," Jonathan starts, resting his palm right above Dio's heartbeat, "That I ever loved Erina?"

He wonders if Jonathan can feel the stutter of his heart -- how the muscle skips a beat before doubling its tempo. He shifts his own arm upwards, carding through Jonathan's hair, while considering the best way to answer the question. Perhaps the orgasm had affected him just as much, for he ends up settling on the truth.

"Yes," he answers, able to be honest now that he's won, "You did. If she had not died, I do not doubt you would be engaged by now."

"But then... why is it that I never... well, never considered doing these things with her?"

"Because," Dio replies, feeling his face heat up and wondering if all men felt so light-headed after passion, "You were too young. I suspect she is still as she was in your mind."

"Mm," Jonathan murmurs, breath ticklish against Dio's collarbone, "Her face hasn't faded."

"Treasure it," he advises, staving off the urge to wrap his arms about the other.

As if reading his mind, Jonathan embraces him, sliding up so that his nose was buried in Dio's hair.

"It doesn't bother you?" he asks.

Here, encircled like this, Dio does not think he'll ever be bothered again.

"Not the slightest," he says instead, pressing a kiss to Jonathan's shoulder.

Jonathan releases him then, pulling away to twine their fingers together.

"Dio," he breathes, inching close and pressing smile to smile, "I love you."

"And I, you."

They curl up against one another in quiet contentment until Jonathan is struck with another whim.

"Dio," he calls, extracting one hand to palm the base of the other man's neck and pulling his cousin from the lull of sleep, "I... I feel the same towards you. I mean, that is, when you finally meet a woman you want to marry, then I'll -- "
"Be the best man, yes," Dio completes, rolling his eyes and kissing him again. "I thought we already discussed this."

"No! Well, I mean, yes, but also -- "

"Isn't it too early to be fretting over this?" Dio asks, pressing himself close, "At this point, there's no one I'd even consider engaging much less marrying."

"But -- "

"Jojo," he raises a hand to press against Jonathan's face. Jonathan, whose eyes are wide, who is in need of reassurance yet again. Dio tweaks his nose and tugs at a stray lock of hair. "I wanted this," he promises, "And I always will."

Jonathan laughs before reaching over to return the favor.

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An Approach of Carrot and Stick

End of Part IV: To Blossom (October - December, 1888)

Chapter End Notes

An explanation for the chapter names of part four:

**Salvia divinorum** / "Diviner's Sage" = the stuff Dio puts into Jonathan's cocoa. It's the most potent natural hallucinogenic and *quite* a trippy experience.

**Brugmansia arborea** / "Angels' trumpets" = not actually used but the plant itself contains scopolamine which, when overdosed, inhibits REM sleep which is what Dio is doing in that chapter to induce sleep paralysis in Jonathan

**Ruta graveolens** / "Common rue" = again, not actually featured, and its effects as an anaphrodisiac (that is, a libido inhibitor) are superstition and not fact, but it matches what's happening in the chapter

**Viscum album** / "Mistletoe" = the only time the language of flowers comes into play: *Kiss me; Affection; To surmount difficulties*
Dio is the first to wake, lifting Jonathan's leg from his waist and pulling his own arm out from underneath Jonathan's shoulder. He slips out of bed and stares at the haphazardly-discarded clothes. In all fairness, they weren't wearing much to begin with.

After double-checking that the door was locked, he prods at the smoldering coals before sidling over to Jonathan's closet. They were still roughly the same size, with a couple nips and tucks, evidenced by how Jonathan kept stealing his rugby shoes. Dio is unsurprised to see his cousin's sense of fashion is lacking as ever and he ends up settling for a pair of gray-blue trousers paired with a light-blue shirt.

"Good morning," Jonathan yawns as Dio's adjusting his collar in the mirror.

"Good morning."

"Is that one of my shirts?"

"It is."

"Oh. And those are my trousers."

"They are."

"I didn't think you had that color," Jonathan mumbles and flops back down. He turns a couple times, then kicks the sheets off and ambles over to the dresser, pulling on a fresh set of drawers before noticing Dio's gaze.

"Dio?" he asks, feeling self-conscious.

"I'd like to dress you," Dio hears himself saying.

Jonathan turns pink.

"You what?"

"Just once," Dio assures, perusing the wardrobe again. "Come Jojo, it'll be like you're at the tailor's."

"Not a dress!" Jonathan makes a face.

"Where would I even get a dress?" Dio pulls out one of Jonathan's more casual outfits, "Here. Is this set dull enough?"

"Oh, alright," Jonathan huffs, obediently lifting his arms.

It irritates him somewhat, that even after the previous night, Jonathan still affects him more than the other way around. Case in point, though his touch strays and lingers where no tailor should, he is the one who hardens, not Jonathan.

"Thank you," Jonathan says, after Dio's finished. His cheeks are red at least, and Dio is temporarily mollified after a kiss on the cheek.

They lean in for a proper kiss, only to be interrupted by a knock on the door.
"Viscount!" the maid calls, "Viscount, are you awake yet? The porridge is getting cold."

Though they both freeze, it is Dio who pulls away first.

"Oh -- yes!" Jonathan calls back. He pauses, and then adds, "Actually could I have breakfast brought to my room?"

And then, when Dio looks at him with disbelief, he adds: "Actually, could we both have breakfast in my room!"

"Both...?"

And before Dio can give any excuse or salvage the situation in any way, Jonathan opens the door.

"My brother and I, I mean," he says, smiling winsomely.

"Oh!" the maid exclaims, understandably surprised. With effort, Dio keeps from scowling. It was a small consolation, but at least they were fully dressed and nowhere near the bed. "Master Dio, we wondered where you were."

"Good morning," he stiffly says, coughing into his hand. "Jojo and I were merely discussing -- finances." At ten in the morning, before breakfast. Yes, this was a stellar excuse.

"Oh," the maid says, curtseying, "Well I'm sorry to interrupt. I'll bring another cart up right away!"

"And some cocoa, if you will!" Jonathan has the gall to add.

"Yessir!"

And then, when Jonathan does not even close the door, Dio strides over. It takes effort not to slam it shut, though he does lock it.

"We weren't discussing finances," Jonathan points out, as if that were the main problem. Dio pinches the bridge of his nose, gallant plans of balcony-hopping to avoid being seen effectively thrown in the bin.

"Jojo." He's at a loss for words.

"Yes?" Jonathan tilts his head, eyes bright.

"If someone asked," start simple start slow, he reminds himself. Jonathan was an idiot at times, but even he couldn't be this hopeless, "Where I was last night, what would you say?"

"That you were with me." He pauses. "Why?"

"You are not to say that." Dio says, laying down the law.

"But you were! What am I supposed to say?"

"That I was staying up late in the library! Or looking for something in the attic! Or in London!"

"I don't think you could get to London without calling for a carriage," Jonathan points out.

"Then say you've no idea and haven't seen me since dinner!"

"But... why?"
"Because, Jojo," Dio grinds, cursing Cross for keeping Jonathan in the dark (though, admittedly, he was a silent accomplice) for all those years at Chichester, "Grown men should not be found in each other's beds."

"But everyone knows I slept in your bed when I was sick."

"Yes, well. You were sick and they knew I was sleeping in the armchair." And then, when Jonathan clearly does not understand, he tries to explain in terms the aspiring gentleman archaeologist might comprehend. "It's not proper," he grinds out, "To be found in bed with another man."

"But why?" Jonathan presses, "No one said anything in Chichester."

"That was boyhood, and besides -- " Dio pauses and then frowns, "You slept in someone else's bed in Chichester?"

"No, but I saw our housemates do it." Jonathan shifts his gaze, "And Cross slept over with Donagan more often than not. No one said anything then."

"The situation was different then," Dio insists, refusing to be bogged down in details. He heaves a sigh, combing through his hair, "Jojo, you know what we did last night was illegal, right?"

Jonathan's eyes widen and he takes several steps back, knees buckling against the armchair.

"That -- that was illegal?"

"Yes. A gross indecency if I recall." He recalled perfectly: there had been a recent prosecution. The defendant had won due to faulty evidence (and the fact he was married) and there were rumors the plaintiff had been one of his jilted lovers.

"But... but..." Jonathan stares at him, searching for answers, "You said that if either of us were the opposite sex --"

"Did I?" He hadn't remembered voicing the line. "Well, I was speaking of our status as cousins."

Their conversation is interrupted a second time by the same maid. It is Dio who unlocks and opens the door, thanking the servant for a well-stocked breakfast cart. Jonathan numbly gives his thanks too, though his gaze is still focused ahead. Dio rolls his eyes, setting out the various foods. He prioritizes Jonathan over his own hunger though, reaching out to touch his cousin's hand.

"Jojo," he tries, "That it's illegal does not make it a sin. Think of the men who consort with courtesans. Technically, prostitution is just as illegal."

"So we're as bad as prostitutes?" Is of course, what Jonathan gets out of the comparison.

"What? No!" he drags the other to the table, sitting them both down, and begins cutting at the sausage and toast, "Look, I highly doubt we would be prosecuted for this, but at the same time, you can't go telling anyone what we've started. That's just -- " he catches Jonathan's expression and cuts himself off, shaking his head and pressing a cut of sausage to the other man's lips. Jonathan eats it, at least, picking up his own cutlery to transfer some of the food to his plate.

"Jojo," he reassures, "The act of love should be reserved between two people in love, wouldn't you agree?"

Jonathan nods.
"Then it's not a sin. However indecent the courts may declare it," he busies himself with the hash, refusing to maintain eye contact, "I love you."

"I love you too," Jonathan replies. Dio can hear the smile in his voice.

He relaxes then, swapping tomatoes for mushrooms and nabbing some preserve as well.

"Besides," he adds, trying to make light of the situation, "I don't think we're losing out on much. Even men and women shouldn't kiss in public."

"Madame Nuttall and her husband do."

"Yes, well," Dio shrugs, "She's a colonial and he's a frenchmen. We are British and hold ourselves to a higher standard."

"I would like to kiss you in public," Jonathan says. Dio wants to strangle him. Or kiss him. One or the other.

"That's -- " he chokes, quickly downing the water. Is his face red? He feels light-headed. Of course Jonathan would say such things with a straight face. "Well, it's not possible." After he's done coughing, he takes Jonathan's hand and presses lips against knuckles. "I don't consider it a great loss," he reiterates, "For I do not want others to see this side of you."

Is it the right thing to say? His cousin relaxes at least, smiling again. He leans forward, giving Dio a light peck.

"Alright," he acquiesces, pulling his hand back to continue eating, "It will be our secret."

"Good." Dio nods, wiping Jonathan's mouth.

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Despite his insistency on propriety, the second they're in the study and the door is locked, Dio goes for the gold in gross indecency, spreading his legs and straddling Jonathan, rocking his hips and sighing softly in the other man's ear.

Jonathan's ears are red, at least, though he's not hard and still trying to read the damn papers even with Dio's arms wrapped about his shoulder. And he only hums -- *hums*!! -- when Dio is licking his earlobe.

Now, admittedly, it was likely he needed to work on his technique. But Jonathan was even more inexperienced, and here he was, reading the news while Dio ground his hips (and teeth) in frustration.

"You're impossible," Dio complains, getting up and flopping on the couch next to Jonathan. He ducks underneath Jonathan's arm, resting his head in Jonathan's lap, where Jonathan's dick was not poking at him because, surprise surprise, it was still soft.

"Hmm?" Jonathan asks. He has the audacity to turn the page.

Dio shifts from side to side, scooting and stretching until his head and shoulders were both pillowed.

"Didn't you say we needed to be discreet?" Jonathan teases. He puts down the paper to stroke Dio's hair though, and Dio seizes upon his hand, kissing each join of finger to palm.
"We are," he maintains, "The door is locked."

"I suppose."

"Kiss me," he demands, closing his eyes when Jonathan did so. It's messy and sloppy and they're at a terrible angle, but Dio is still tingling by the end of it.

"Jojo," he growls, blinking rapidly to clear his head. He sits up and takes Jonathan's hand, guiding it to his crotch.

Jonathan raises his eyebrows in surprise.

"You're aroused," he says.

"And you're not," Dio retorts, palming the other for emphasis. "What did you think was digging into your side?"

"I thought it was your belt," Jonathan admits. He tugs his hand out of Dio's grasp and carefully undoes said belt.

Even when he's not clouded with lust, Jonathan's brand of eroticism is smothering. He undoes the buttons on Dio's pants and reaches inside his underclothes. Dio can hear himself gasping and moaning, a chorale of 'yes, yes, yes' while Jonathan takes his sweet time. He pulls Dio down, so that his own legs are dangling over the end of couch, and peppers Dio's face and neck with kisses. And his fingers, his damnably deft fingers. One set is digging into Dio's waist; the other is skirting up and down his erection.

At least, Dio thinks, when Jonathan lets him down from the high, his cousin didn't pick up the paper afterwards. Jonathan tangles their clothed limbs, unbothered by the splatter of semen across his own shirt, and kisses his forehead.

"I don't believe you," Dio groans. If he hadn't just come, he would be furious, he's certain. As it is, he just feels defeated. "You're still not hard?"

"I could say the same," his cousin chuckles. And then he pauses, suddenly uncertain. "I did... I made you finish last night, didn't I?"

Something in Jonathan's tone snaps Dio out of his post-coital daze and he pushes himself up. He thinks back to Chichester where, at the height of adolescence, he was soiling three trousers each week. Some of the other boys in the York class had had it even worse and he had always assumed Jonathan had been in similar straits.

"Jojo..." he uneasily starts, "How long does it take?"

"Hm?"

"Between..." he racks his wrung-out vocabulary for the words, "Finishing and starting."

"Oh." Jonathan shifts to hold his waist. "A day or two."

"A day or two," Dio repeats.

"Sometimes a week." Jonathan shrugs, "I never kept track. Is it that unusual?"

Of course Jonathan would think himself normal. To be fair though, Dio did consider himself normal in this respect.
Was this his fault too, he wonders. Jonathan didn't seem to have any qualms about the sex act at least, but then, he had never showed interest in it until the dreamscape. That he had masturbated at all before all this is something of a relief, though Dio is still at a loss as to how he never caught him in the act.

Then he realizes Jonathan is still expecting a reply.

"No," he shrugs, laying back down, "I suppose it's not."

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When they untangle themselves, Dio takes it upon himself to go upstairs and get Jonathan a clean shirt. He changes out of his own pants as well, washing his face and combing his hair. A double-check of his reflection revealed that, just as the doctor said, the scratches from the Stone Mask's spikes had fully healed.

The quick errand also gives him time to think. While it was good they had settled the illicit nature of their relationship and even better than Jonathan understood the importance of being discreet, he is loathe at the thought of locking doors all the time. And while the Joestar manor was spacious (and home, he can grudgingly admit), they were sure to slip up at some point.

"Come with me to London," he says upon re-entering the study, tossing over the clean shirt.

"London?"

"Yes, London," Dio repeats, busying himself with the assortment of miniatures -- anything to keep from a second round, "We can live in the Fitzroy flat again when I start up at Coward Chance."

"I don't know..." Jonathan starts, rebuttoning his sleeves, "I mean, I still have so many papers to sort through."

"So bring them with you. You can read them on the carriage even. Most of Father's contacts are in London after all."

"Do you think I should pay a visit to them?"

"Not if you don't need to. But being in the city will be good for you. I'm sure you can get access to the Hugh Hudson library again."


"What?"

"Dio, I don't have the time for archaeology right now. The estate... the bonds... the business partners..." he takes a deep breath, shuffling through the records again, "I've been staring at charts and maps and numbers for months and it's still not sticking!"

"Were't you the one who advised me to pursue a subject I was passionate about?"

"That was before Father died. And you are passionate about law, I see that now." Jonathan shakes his head, "I love archaeology, I really do. But if I were in London, I wouldn't be able to resist it. I'd probably start a doctorate or something."

"So start a doctorate," Dio shrugs. The 'just come with me' is implied.

"Not now," Jonathan shakes his head, "But later. Once everything is settled and the funds are
reinvested. Duke Kensington said that, by placing the right bets, I can expect a five to fifteen perfect return per annum."

"Do you have any idea what that means," Dio drawls.

"Sure," Jonathan nods, "It means that I have to make the right decisions."

Upon seeing his cousin's set jaw, Dio sighs.

"Shall I stay back and help you?"

Jonathan looks up from his wretched numbers and outright laughs.

"Dio, you're even worse with numbers!"

"Watch your mouth," Dio snaps. He crosses his arms and huffs. "So that's that then? We'll be miles away for the first time in years because you're intent on keeping away from your silly subject?"

"Don't put it like that," Jonathan complains. "I'm doing this out of necessity."

Dio cannot believe his ears. His cousin, Jonathan Joestar of the silver spoon, talking of necessity! His salary as a lawyer is more than enough to support the two of them in Fitzroy, but he understands it's pennies in a pond when compared to the investments of the late Viscount. He must climb to the top of the firm -- or start one up himself -- if he wants to have a chance at standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

Perhaps this is for the best, he reasons, while they laugh and joke at the dinner table. Jonathan was neither crossing the Atlantic nor leaving him -- and more than that, Jonathan was now irrevocably his. Coward Chance will keep him busy most days of the week, he will be starting as a junior partner after all, but it's not as if a weekend excursion to the Joestar manor is out of the question. And what with Jonathan's absurdly long refractory period... well, even that could be a blessing.

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In his own bedroom, Dio wakes up to a tap-tap-tap on his balcony. He rubs at his eyes before flicking the lights on to reveal his cousin, grinning stupidly.

"At least you're dressed appropriately..." he mutters, opening the door.

"It was grand!" Jonathan declares, cheeks and nose a rosy red, "I felt like a thief, jumping from ledge to ledge!"

"I can see the old ladies tittering at church already," Dio snorts, hanging up the other man's scarf and overcoat, "Did you hear the Viscount? He broke his neck robbing his own house!"

"It's not that big of a jump," Jonathan reasons, pulling off his gloves. He kicks his shoes and socks and pants off too before falling onto Dio's bed. "Kensington's made us jump farther."

"Fair enough." Dio climbs into bed too, turning off the lights. And then he hisses because --

"Oh, sorry."

"You were wearing socks!" Dio demands, "How are your feet so cold?!"

"I forgot my shoes at first," Jonathan mumbles, burrowing closer. Dio is relieved to discover the rest of him, well outside of his nose, is warm. He wraps an arm about Jonathan's shoulder, resting
Right as he's phasing out of consciousness, Jonathan gives a little 'oh', touching the inside of his thigh.

"Dio," he whispers, and his voice is practically reverent, "You're amazing."

Dio could say any number of things. He groans instead, tugging Jonathan's ear.

"Should I...?" Jonathan asks, grasp inches away.

"No," Dio mutters, "I'm fine. Go to sleep." Frankly, he has an image to maintain, Jonathan's delusions notwithstanding, and he does not want to experience that all-encompassing contentment a second, no, third, time. Jonathan complies by retracting his hand and kissing Dio's collarbone.

They're both snoring within minutes.
The second morning they spend together begins with Dio rudely awoken by a knocking on his door. There is some sort of conspiracy in all this, he swears, pulling on more fitting garments and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What is it?" he asks, taking care to sound groggy. With one hand placed over Jonathan's mouth, he shakes his cousin's shoulder. Jonathan's eyes snap open, darting from side to side in panic. Dio lets go of him, pressing a finger to his lips, and motions at the door.

"Master Dio, it's me," the butler announces.

The two of them trade perplexed looks -- it is not yet half past eight!

"Ah." Dio gets off the bed and throws Jonathan his winter garments, pushing his cousin into the washroom before unlocking and opening his door, "What can I do for you?"

"Master Dio, have you seen the Viscount?"

"My brother?" Dio raises an eyebrow, ushering the butler into his room while Jonathan poked his head out of the washroom, "Surely he would be in bed at this hour."

"No, I'm afraid he's not," the old man replies. Dio curses internally a third time -- Jonathan hadn't locked his bedroom door; probably hadn't even considered it!

"He's not in his room? Really?" And then he catches his idiot cousin trying to make a break for the door and has to grab the butler by the arm and awkwardly drag him to the balcony. "Say, Morris," he stiltedly starts, "I was wondering if you might -- "

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Jonathan make his great hallway escape. At least the door to his room wasn't locked.

"You were saying?" the butler prompts, looking out at the balcony.

Dio swallows and then smiles. "It's the damnedest thing but I've forgotten. It's this early hour, impossible to think clearly. Speaking of which, what do you require of my brother at this hour?"

"Morris!" Jonathan greets, throwing open his door. He's dressed himself in nightclothes at least, though Dio still wants to strangle him. "What's the racket at this hour?"

"Vi-Viscount! Where were you?"

"Oh I was... talking a quick stroll."

Dio and the butler wear similar looks of disbelief.

"Round the hallways," Jonathan disclaims, adamantly sticking to his story, "I find it very good for thinking."

The butler opens his mouth and then closes it, exiting Dio's room to bow low.

"Forgive me for disturbing you at this hour," the man begins, "But there's a visitor for you. He says it's an urgent matter."
Thoughts of teaching Jonathan how to sneak in and out of places fly out the window as the cousins exchange questioning glances again.

"This guest..." Jonathan asks, "Did he leave a name?"

"Viscount Cross, if memory serves."

When it comes to friends, Jonathan's mind works faster than Dio's. His face falls and he quickly excuses himself, slamming the door in his wake. He reappears within seconds, having dressed himself in record time, and careens through the hallway to stampede down the stairs.

"Cross!" he screams, throwing his arms around the other man, "Cross, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be," his schoolfriend says, weakly returning the embrace. "I'm sorry I couldn't come to your father's funeral either." They step back and swap tentative smiles. "I guess we're both Viscounts now."

"How long has it been?" Jonathan asks, taking his friend by the shoulder and leading him to the dining hall, "Maids, please set the table for three. And bring breakfast out at the earliest chance!"

"About a week ago," Cross replies, allowing himself to be helped into a chair. He takes a shakey breath and presses against his temples. "I haven't even read his will yet. I suppose I'm using the title prematurely."

"I understand," Jonathan sympathizes, "I waited two weeks before reading my father's will." He grasps at the other man's hand, squeezing tight.

"My condolences," Dio murmurs, making his entrance and then sliding into another seat.

"Oh, Brando," Cross smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes, "Terribly sorry to wake you at this hour. I..." his gaze focuses and unfocuses. He blinks rapidly when Jonathan squeezes his hand again.

"Don't be," Jonathan excuses. He takes his hand away when the maids begin setting the table. He piles food onto Cross' plate then, "Eat," he urges, "Eat, and then we'll talk."

"Joestar," Cross says with wet eyes, "You never stop sounding like my mother."

"I couldn't believe it," Cross mumbles, when they're walking to the stables for Jonathan has insisted on a ride. 'Horses are wonderful for the spirit,' he says. Perhaps he didn't notice Cross' expression. Perhaps he passed it off. "To an extent, I still can't."

"I know," Jonathan soothes, "I know."

In the handful of months since his glorious Spanish wedding, Cross has not changed much. Well, at their age, they had all but stopped growing. But still, there is a harrowed edge to his appearance -- the bits of black (ash and soot presumably) in his neatly-cut fingernails and the bags underneath his eyes which speak of weeks of poor sleep -- that make him look old. Older, at least, than his age. As they're saddling up their horses, Jonathan wonders if he had looked like that while grieving.

(He had probably looked worse, he knows.)

For two individuals so fond of chatter, they ride on through the snow in uncharacteristic silence.
Cross is lost in his own thoughts, barely holding onto the reins, and though Jonathan tries, he cannot find the right words to say. His own father had accounted for his death, had not suffered in passing. The late Viscount had waited twenty long years for his wife and had, to an extent, welcomed death.

But for Cross, for his father, Jonathan does not know. Did his friend's father die of an illness? A freak accident? Was there foul play involved? Perhaps they had been closer than he thought -- try as he might, he cannot remember speaking to Cross' parents whilst in Bilbao.

"I'm sorry," he repeats when they're brushing down the horses. He has yet to find the right words.

"Don't be," Cross murmurs, taking another shuddering breath. His shoulders quake for a moment before he steadies himself. The brush, however, falls out of his trembling hand. Jonathan immediately picks it up, and Cross smiles, taking it.

"I'm sorry," his friend says, "For coming to you like this. I'm always asking for your help, it's truly --"

"Cross," Jonathan interrupts, stroking the mare's snout before pulling off his gloves, "Don't be like this. I owe so much to you back in Chichester, lending a shoulder and ear is the least I can do."

"May I speak in confidence?" Cross asks, when they're walking back to the manor. The foreign carriage and driver, Jonathan notes, are still waiting by the entrance.

"Of course." Jonathan leads the other man into the parlor, calling for brandy, warm milk, and cakes.

Cross wrings his hands, such a strange motion for so carefree of a man!, and dredges up another smile when the serving tray is wheeled up.

Despite his request for a confiding ear, he keeps his peace for a while longer, sipping at the concoction of cocoa and brandy. When he finally deigns to speak, Jonathan is thankful his teacup is set down and he has already finished his portion of cake. If he were holding the cup, he would have dropped it; if he were eating, he would have choked.

"Clare is dead," Cross elaborates. "Well, missing and presumed dead." His facial muscles contort themselves in an effort to mimic a smile. "It was a shipwreck. Kind of absurd, you know? Off the coast of India. Seven hundred people and then some."

Slowly, slowly, Jonathan makes his way over to his old schoolmate. His ears are still ringing with the words. He hadn't known Donagan well -- had barely known the other boy, really -- but he had seen how close they were, how fiercely they had defended one another.

"Oh Cross," he whispers, and even to his ears, his voice sounds saccharine.

"It's been four weeks. Father -- Father wanted to go look for him. We survived a shipwreck, Joestar. It took us two years and a lot of gumption, but we survived. Clare... Clare was the one who pushed us along. That's why Webb and Wilcox -- and all the others, myself included -- defer to him. It was because of him that we survived those two years. That it could even be called a vacation and not some hellish reminiscence. Our families thought us dead, my parents were intent on adopting a fourth cousin, and no one -- no one believed we would survive."

He looks at Jonathan then, no longer on the brink of tears, and bites his bottom lip.

"I don't believe it for a second," he shakes his head, "How could Clare be dead? They haven't even
found a single body!"

"You must keep faith," Jonathan mistakenly advises. This is one of his greatest regrets, for Cross... Cross relaxes then, smiling and touching his shoulder.

"I knew you would understand Joestar. Thank you."

Numbly, Jonathan is made to listen while the other man recounts his plan to sail to India, to search the site of the shipwreck for clues of his cousin's whereabouts. Was this how his own father had sounded, he dazedly wonders, when he had asked Duke Kensington to watch over his sons and estate? Cross is about to do the same, Jonathan can see it in his eyes, and then he does and he cannot find the words to say no.

"Elizabeth is still in the Isle of Wight. I... I haven't told her my plans, I confess. I couldn't. She's -- " he flushes, "she's stopped her flowers months back."

Cross is married, Jonathan remembers, and the reality of the situation hits him.

"You can't," he says. How did his voice sound then? Had he faltered? Had he been on the brink of tears himself? What were the right words to say, what could he have done otherwise, to make Cross stay.

Instead of an argument, instead of anything approaching rationality, he simply repeats himself. "You can't."

"I won't be gone forever Joestar," Cross says. There's no room for argument in his tone. "Please," he adds, "Be kind to Elizabeth. Mismanage the estate all you want, I'm sure my son..." he shakes his head, standing up and going over to the escritoire. He pulls out a sheet of paper and writes, in that distinctly neat longhand, an impromptu will which reads like it was drafted at the courthouse itself.

Jonathan watches, frozen to his seat, as the other man stamps his seal and signs his name with a flourish, presenting him with the finished document.

"I can't take this. Cross, I can't."

"I'll leave it here then."

"Cross," he begs, "What can I say to make you reconsider?"

"I used to know what I wanted, you know?" The other man shakes his head, "It was so clear. Inherit the name, inherit the business, make a good fortune, retire young. Have children and grandchildren -- name my youngest son Clarence -- all that."

"You still can," Jonathan earnestly says.

Cross shakes his head.

"No," he says, "It's not what I wanted at all."

"Cross," he starts, pleading, "Cross, you must not think like this."

"I did not come to you for counsel, Joestar," he murmurs, sitting down and slingling an arm about Jonathan's shoulders. "You're a good man, you know? Brando told me about your first love. I think it's admirable, how you've managed to keep loving her."
"This isn't about me. Cross, you shouldn't be thinking these things. You're -- you're about to be a father, why can't you see that?"

"Miss Elizabeth is a sweet-tempered girl. If she were marrying me for my name or money, I might have been able to turn a blind eye. But the things she wants -- care, conversation, a family, love, I cannot give them to her."

"How do you know that?" Jonathan demands, "You call me a good man, but look at yourself! Would an evildoer have such thoughts?" Out of desperation, he reaches forward, shaking his friend's shoulders. "Cross, snap out of it."

"I was the one who was supposed to be on that ship," the other man lilts. "But because we were looking to trade with the Portuguese... they've a port in Mandvi, you know? And Clare learned Portuguese at Chichester, so he was the natural choice. I didn't think anything of it then. He was on his way back, you know? He was supposed to sail from Bombay, but -- " He looks at Jonathan then, affectionately accusing, if such an expression were possible, "Do you know what it's like, Joestar? Knowing that someone may have died in your place?"

Jonathan swallows, saying nothing.

My mother did, he could say. Could say, but does not.

"I don't," Jonathan quietly lies. "But I know grief. I know heartbreak. It's all the same."

"No," Cross retorts, standing back up, "It's not."

- 

"I could have stopped him," Jonathan whispers at a later time.

"Could is not the same as should," Dio reminds.

- 

"Where is Cross?" Dio asks, when Jonathan opens the door to the study. He is reclining on the sofa, flipping through some recent court transcripts.

"He left."

"That was rather sudden," Dio shifts his gaze to clock. "I thought he'd stay for dinner." It is only when Jonathan all but collapses against the armchair that he sit up and places the bundle of papers down.

"Jojo. What's wrong?"

"We made plans to speak again, but it felt like I was lying."

Dio frowns, not understanding.

Jonathan refuses to elaborate however, pulling out his own papers and licking the stub of the fountain pen. The room is filled with the furious scratchings and scratching-out's. Did they quarrel, Dio is tempted to ask. But as Cross and his cousin had always got along so well -- and as they had gone on another one of their precious rides -- he doubts it. And so, he keeps quiet, going back to his papers.

At thirty-three minutes past twelve, Jonathan groans and throws the pen. It sails across the room,
hitting the leftmost shelf and then clattering to the floor.

"Dio," Jonathan says in a broken voice, "Why do good people do bad things?"

He might as well have asked why the sun moved from east to west, for all the worthwhile answers there were to give. Dio puts his papers down and goes to pick the pen up, setting it down on a nearby shelf.

"Donagan was on the Vaitarna when it sunk. He's missing and presumed dead. Cross -- " he takes a gulp of air, holding back from ripping the document Cross had given him, "Cross is going to India to look for him. He left his estate and wife in my hands. This is his signature and seal."

Dio walks from end to end, taking the folded slip of paper and skimming it. It seemed the other man's propensity for memorization had not faded.

"At a glance," he murmurs, "I would say this is legally binding. A valid court document." He goes back to the fountainpen and neatly adds his name to the witness list.

"I don't care about that," Jonathan bemoans. "I just -- " he clutches at his sleeves, at his chest, at the edge of the desk, resting his cheek on the papers.

"Cross was... Cross was everything I wanted to be," he concedes. "Light-hearted, resourceful, courteous, hardworking, loyal."

"Do not," Dio interjects, "place the living on pedestals."

"Dio, Cross is married. He has a wife. She's pregnant with his child. He was about to become a father." He stresses each of those words, as if repeating the truth would somehow fix the situation. "I can't condone that -- I can't. How could he... how could he leave his wife and child and go searching for a corpse?"

Having no fulfilling answers to give, Dio holds his peace. It is odd, he thinks, to understand the man a little better now.

'I would do the same,' he thinks and does not say.

"What am I to do?" Jonathan asks when Dio returns the declaration. He stares at Cross' longhand, and in doing so, remembers the boy.

"Do you plan to honor the agreement?" Dio asks.

"I don't have any choice, do I?" Jonathan laughs bitterly. "Cross asked me to break the news to his wife."

"Then you already know what needs to be done."

Jonathan takes a deep breath, nodding, and then rings for the butler.

"Please arrange for a carriage to Hampshire at the earliest opportunity," he instructs.

"Of course," the butler bows. "Shall I ask the maids to pack your bags?"

"Yes please."

"And this carriage, will it be for one?"
"Two," Dio corrects. Jonathan looks at him, surprised. "We would like to pay the household of the Viscount Cross our respects."

"Right away. I'll have the maids pack for both of you then." He bows, excusing himself.

"You don't need to go."

"Hampshire to the Isle of Wight, yes?" Dio asks, ignoring him.

"Yes."

"Alright." He walks back to the sofa and sits down. "Have you thought of what to say?"

Jonathan's brows furrow.

"No. No, I haven't."

- 

"I am not surprised," Cross' wife says with a lilting Spanish accent. "My husband has been unwell since learning of his cousin's disappearance. I fear the death of his father further strained his conscience." Her hands are folded and her gaze is straight and Jonathan resolutely keeps from looking at her stomach.

"I have been charged with overseeing the family accounts in his absence," Jonathan explains, pulling out the sheet of paper. He gets off of his chair and kneels by her side then, "While I do not agree with my friend's decision, he is still my friend through and through. Therefore I pledge myself to you, Viscountess, and swear on my father's name that..." he stumbles for though he had rehearsed on the carriage, seeing the mother-to-be in the flesh was a different matter entirely, "That you will be taken care of."

If she is surprised with Jonathan's declaration, she does a good job hiding it, lowering her eyes and quirking her lips. Cross' wife is three years his senior, making her five years older than either of them.

"Lord Joestar, I thank you kindly. I am sure you have our best interests in mind."

Uncertain what to do with himself, Jonathan scrambles to his feet.

"However," the woman continues, "I have already accepted an invitation to stay with my own relatives in London."

"I see." Jonathan nods, feeling very much like a child wearing the trappings of maturity. And then he blurts out: "Are you fit to travel? In your condition, I mean?"

Elizabeth Cross hides a smile behind her hand.

"Lord Joestar, I am pregnant, not invalid." And then, cutting Jonathan's flustered excuses short, she adds, "But I am also tiring of the seaside air. My relatives believe a change of setting will be best. I will return here when my husband returns, but no sooner than that."

"If I may," Jonathan stammers, taking out a sheet of paper and scribbling down the Fitzroy Square address, "Please send me your London address. I would like, if you are willing of course, I would like to come visit. In Cross' stead, I mean. And let you and your family know how your husband's estate is doing."
The newly-made Viscountess regards him as one might regard a child. But she smiles nonetheless, lowering her eyes.

"I shall do so, Lord Joestar. Thank you very much for your calling."

"No, no, please don't stand," Jonathan panics, "The -- the manservant will see me out. Thank you for coming to see me, Viscountess, and -- and I'm sorry. Really." He nearly forgets his hat in his haste to get out, and crashes into his cousin who's waiting in the parlor.

"How was it?" Dio asks, when they're back on the ferry to Hampshire.

"Women are much stronger than we give them credit for," Jonathan muses. "I am relieved, to know that Cross' wife is of good character."

Dio, who has seen past the powder and taken note of her hollowed cheeks and red eyes, keeps quiet.

"I have thought over what you said," Jonathan continues, "About London, I mean. I would like to come with you, if the offer still stands."

A pleasant surprise is a surprise nonetheless and Dio raises his eyebrows.

"Why the change in mind?"

"Various things," Jonathan shrugs, "But I've researched Cross' contacts and most of them are in London too. I'll need to speak with his solicitor. And his father's solicitor by the sound of it. And -- he quickly glances about and, after confirming there was no one in earshot, whispers in Dio's ear, "If you don't mind, I'd like to sit on the other side of the carriage. On the way back, I mean."

Dio laughs. He would be more offended if Jonathan weren't so red.

"Of course Jojo," he readily replies, "We ought to get some sleep after all."
Some think it well to be all melancholic

When they return from Hampshire, the village church has already finished Christmas decorations. To properly mourn the Viscount's passing, they decide to stay in the manor for the holidays, exiting only to pay their respects at church. In the interim, both of them are in communication with contacts in London. Murray (now a direct subordinate of Dr. Petrie) encourages Jonathan to apply for an alumnus library pass while Pyrce demands Dio come to drinks with him. As Coward Chance is expecting Dio on the third of January, they aim to arrive at the Fitzroy flat with one day to spare. In order to account for the snowfall, they leave the mansion a day before Dio's twenty-first birthday.

"I'd like to try something," Dio says, after they've spent a day in the carriage.

"Something new?" Jonathan asks, allowing Dio to shift him about.

"Mmm," Dio concurs, pulling the other into his lap. As it is a reverse of their positions in the study, Dio is the one being straddled. He kisses his cousin's jaw and slips his hand underneath the shirt, brushing his fingers against Jonathan's nipples.

He hears Jonathan's breath hitch as he shifts his hips.

"Should I," his cousin tries, only to throw his forehead against Dio's shoulder when his trousers are unfastened.

"Should you?" Dio teases, thumb pressed against leaking tip.

"Um," Jonathan flushes, "Be doing something?"

"Hm?" he pauses to pretend to think and ever so lightly scrapes his fingernails against the soft underskin. Jonathan hisses, eyes whirling from pleasure, barely able to register Dio's: "No. Not at the moment."

He switches between stroking and rubbing until the man before him is stretched taut, until his own palm is slick with precome. Moments before Jonathan finishes however, he extracts his hand, pressing a kiss to his cousin's brow.

A pitiful whine escapes Jonathan's lips and the sound sends shivers down his spine.

"Patience," Dio chuckles, carefully tucking him back in.

It takes a couple heaving breaths before Jonathan can find his voice.

"Dio," he rasps, "Dio, why did you...?"

"Patience," he only repeats, holding him close.

Jonathan whines a second time, at a slightly lower pitch, shifting his hips and grinding needily. Dio rubs his lower back in small and slow circles, helping nothing.

"Oh Jojo," he sighs, petting his cousin's hair and brow, "You are quite wicked. To enjoy this sort of thing in a moving carriage."

"Shut up," Jonathan mumbles, burying his reddening face in Dio's shoulder. "You're the one who made me like this."
That was true. After all, it was he, Dio, who had been unable to keep his hands to himself throughout the Hampshire journey.

"Yes," Dio agrees, craning his head to kiss the nape of Jonathan's neck, "It is my fault."

The admittance does little to soothe Jonathan's ache. Though he whines and cants his hips, though he digs his fingers into Dio's shoulders, the moment his hand moves to unfasten his own trousers, Dio bats them away. 'Patience', his cousin says for the third time.

"Talk to me then," he demands, hopelessly clenching and unclenching his fists. "Distract me."

"What would you have me say?" Dio asks, slipping his fingers between Jonathan's.

"A story," he blurts out, the first thing that comes to mind, "A happy one."

Without pause, Dio launches into a fairy tale. It was one of the German ones, Jonathan can recognize, though Dio takes care to sanitize the ending. The evildoer is reformed, the do-gooders are rewarded, and everyone goes home wiser and richer, to live happily ever after.

"Satisfied?" Dio asks when he's done. He moves his hands up to comb through dark locks.

"I fear for your children," Jonathan complains, "You're a terrible storyteller."

"You wanted a happy ending!"

"Yes, but you told the story so strangely!"

"How was it 'strangely'?"

"You were..." he struggles for the words, "So condescending! Sarcastic, really."

"Well I don't believe in fairytales," Dio sniffs, "And I should hope my children don't either."

"Children are meant to believe in fairytales."

"Oh," Dio breathes, pressing his hand to Jonathan's groin to change the subject, "You've softened."

"Yes, well," Jonathan is about to retort, but Dio unbuttons his trousers again, slowly but surely stroking him to hardness.

"Dio -- " he gasps, unable to control the twitching of his fingers and toes, "Dio, what are you -- "

His cousin says the same word, the same damn word, and Jonathan gives a frustrated cry, smashing their mouths together. This causes Dio to stop entirely, hands moving to wrap about Jonathan's waist, bare fingers digging into clothed sides.

"Jojo," Dio chides, nipping at his bottom lip before pulling back, "Didn't you say I could take the lead this time?"

Jonathan grinds his teeth before relenting.

"Yes," he says, still unable to his spasms, "Yes, because it's your birthday."

"Thank you," Dio murmurs, making an effort to kiss the pout from his lips. Those terrible fingers return to their efforts and Jonathan is in bliss -- for all of a minute. Because after then Dio is tucking him back in and kissing his brow and rubbing the small of his back.
Jonathan almost cries from frustration.

"Jojo," Dio says. His tone is warning.

"Tell me another story," he pleads, desperate to take his mind off of things. Like how hard he was. Or how he was rutting like a rabbit in heat.

"A happy one?"

"Yes!"

And Dio does, stroking Jonathan's forehead and cheeks throughout the tale. His cousin's voice sounds far away and at times, he cannot follow the string of the narration. When he comes to, he finds the carriage has stopped at a roadside inn and he is aroused no more.

But his legs are weak, so very weak, and they nearly give way when climbing the stairs. Dio needs to prop him up then, and Jonathan laughs, trying to make light of the situation. He does not, at least, need to be helped in the washroom. After supper, Dio kisses him goodnight and Jonathan is too tired to ask for an explanation.

Come morning and the last leg of their journey, Dio returns them to the previous position.

"Dio," Jonathan complains, "Your birthday has already passed."

"Do you dislike it so much?" Dio asks, looking hurt.

Jonathan is being played, he knows it, but because it is Dio and because it is a part of his birthday gift...

"Oh alright," he sighs, seating himself in the other man's lap, "But please don't -- " he's cut off as Dio gets to work.

"Don't...?" his cousin cues. He has the nerve to stop his ministrations.

"Don't tell such boring stories," Jonathan finishes. The words feel childish even as they're leaving.

"Hmm..." Dio smiles, stroking his slit, "I'll try."

He brings Jonathan to the brink of orgasm three more times and when they pull into the now-familiar London borough, Jonathan thinks he might collapse.

"Viscount?" he hears the driver say, "Viscount, are you alright?"

"He's had too much to drink," Dio smoothly lies, propping him onto his feet. "Would you bring our bags up? I'll help my brother to bed. He's a little anxious you see. We've been away from the city for months."

"Right away sir."

"You," Jonathan gasps, when he's finally able to coordinate his limbs well enough to sit up, "Are a wretch. An absolute wretch." He is soft again but still leaking and he swears he's soiled this set of drawers beyond repair and what if the coachman saw the stain? And Dio is just looking at him -- looking and smiling! Jonathan wants to kiss the smile from his lips -- he would too, if he could stand. As it is, he tries to point and ends up falling to the side. Dio catches him, a gallant but useless gesture as the bed was right underneath him, and Jonathan feels his cousin laugh.
"Perhaps," Dio replies, easing him onto the mattress. He leaves then, and Jonathan is tempted, so tempted, to reach inside his trousers and stroke himself to completion. He could do it, in seconds even. It had been two days since Dio's birthday, surely his present had finished! But he wants to sleep more than anything.

Dio returns soon after, robbing him of both climax and slumber, and presses a dry towel to Jonathan's brow.

He had been sweating, he realizes. Sweating excessively, by the looks of it.

"I'll change you out of these," Dio says, undoing both jacket and shirt. "You'll get sick if you stay in wet clothes."

"If I do get sick," Jonathan drawls, "It'll be your fault." He wants to throw a fit, wants to do any number of things really, but being kept on the brink for days has drained him significantly. If he is honest, even talking exhausts him.

"Mmm."

Somehow, Dio manages to get him out of his garments. Jonathan feels like a rag doll, even moreso when Dio cups his balls. His eyelids slide shut and his hips buck. Would this be it? Surely Dio didn't intend to keep him from orgasm indefinitely!

When he feels an alien sensation on his prick, he snaps his eyes open, chest heaving.

"Dio!" he chokes, propping himself up on his elbows with difficulty, "Dio, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Dio asks, raising an eyebrow. He makes no effort to move his mouth however, so Jonathan tries to snap his legs shut.

It's a bad move: Dio grabs his thighs and squeezes, digging his thumbs in, and Jonathan moans, collapsing against the bed.

"Dio," he pleads, "Dio, that's disgusting and demeaning, please don't -- " he loses coherency for a moment when he feels the scrape of teeth.

"Dio!" he shouts, gnashing his teeth impotently, "If you continue, I swear I shall never kiss you again!"

Dio only laughs, stroking his thighs and squeezing his balls. But it is his lips and tongue and teeth bring Jonathan to climax -- this, Jonathan cannot forget. He comes with a sob, a whiting-out of vision, a convulsing of all four limbs, and likely flops about for a full minute. He drags out the last syllable of Dio's name for a while, stopping only to breathe and Dio somehow manages to prolong the orgasm -- or perhaps it is an aftereffect of the delay. Either way, Jonathan shakes and shivers and moans incoherently, hiding his face and rolling to his side. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his cousin rise to his feet.

Jonathan is grateful that Dio grabs his handkerchief on the way to the bathroom -- to swallow seed would be vile.

There's the sound of running water followed by the brushing of teeth. Jonathan closes his eyes and keeps them closed, even after Dio turns off the lights and climbs into bed.

Petulantly, he wants to throw his cousin's arm off. But the orgasm leaves him with little outrage left, and he heaves another relentful sigh.

"Wretch," he says again, scooting forward to kiss the other.
"Your wretch," Dio amends, sucking on his bottom lip.

- "Does it bring you pleasure?" Jonathan asks over breakfast, "To see me like that?"

"Not especially," Dio shrugs, biting into his toast. "Though I did like your threats at the end. Very creative."

Jonathan sticks out his tongue before concentrating on peeling the apple.

"But then..." he starts, brow furrowing, "Why would you want that?"

"Various reasons."

"Such as?"

"I was curious how long you could last. Since you've got such a long refractory period, I wondered if you might be able to stave off completion for longer as well."

There's a stiltedness in Dio's response that Jonathan is quick to pick up on.

"And?" he prods.

Dio pauses, considering, and then says in a quieter tone:

"I wanted you to see what it was like." He averts his gaze then, busying himself with the mash.

"What it was like?"

"To need."

"Oh." Jonathan mulls this over, cutting the peeled apple into slices. "But why?"

"Because," Dio's eyes are dark when he leans forward for a kiss and Jonathan tastes mushrooms, eggs, and tomato, "It is what I feel in excess around you."

And so begins the idyllic post-university life at Fitzroy Square that Dio had dreamed of. He is expected at the office five days a week but after the initial two-week-long training period manages to negotiate it to four days with a break on Wednesday.

After reconnecting with Murray and congratulating her on her career advancements, Jonathan is convinced into obtaining an alumnus library pass. 'It's only for the weekend,' he insists, and actually only uses it on Friday and Saturday. He spends the rest of the week running from one end of London to the next, occupied with his father's finances, then the reading of Cross' late father's will, then the execution of Cross' declaration.

Halfway through the month, Wilcox makes a surprise visit, announcing his own family's stake in Cross' finances (and also that Webb had found a second girl willing to marry him). The three of them sit on the snow-covered balcony sipping at coffee and cocoa. Jonathan says again that he cannot believe Cross would leave, like that. Wilcox shrugs, marking it as inevitable. There is a tiredness to his gaze, even though he's as quick as ever to tease, and not for the first time, Jonathan wonders what their group of four had been through before Chichester.
After Jonathan has spent a month lurking about in the library, Murray announces that another set of bursaries for archaeology had been arranged, courtesy of Ms. Edwards, and there would be an influx of students in the spring term. After much quibbling which resulted in a telegram from the master of seriation himself, Jonathan is convinced to take up a post as assistant lecturer once again. He is to give a mock lecture in the middle of February on an archaeological subject of his choice to be consumed by the current batch of undergraduates. Naturally, he chooses the Stone Mask.

The middle of January then, signals the arrival of Elizabeth Cross in London. True to her word, she sends a missive to Jonathan relaying her address and true to his word Jonathan rushes to meet her. They make plans to meet on Sundays, for it turned out they frequented the same church. Dio comes along, mildly amused to see his cousin fretting over child's books and toys.

Jonathan is happy too then, so happy that, when they come home after keeping the Viscountess company, he kisses Dio and sweetly asks, fumbling and mumbling in his usual flustered fashion, if Dio would like his unusual favor returned.

Unfortunately, enthusiasm is no substitute for experience and Jonathan is absolutely awful. He ambles and dawdles and does not understand how pull back his lips and work the head. He is unable to take Dio entirely in his mouth and is working off the -- not incorrect, admittedly -- assumption that he was more important than his technique.

His assumption is dead-on for Dio has never imagined Jonathan on his knees, eyes fluttering, and lips trying (and failing) to wrap about his cock. He comes within a minute, legs buckling and seed spilling. Jonathan gags (of course he does), but he also laughs and smiles and scoops Dio up afterwards, tracing lines across his chest and waist underneath his already-unbuttoned shirt.

They are a perfect fit, Dio thinks, combing his fingers through Jonathan's hair. It's a matter of time before Jonathan's technique improves, but to have him -- here and now.

His cousin must really be rubbing off on him, he muses, for a treacherous thought settles into his mind when they're twined together under the sheets.

"Jojo, are you -- jealous of Cross?"

"What?"

"Do you feel envious of him, I mean."

"Why would I feel envy towards him?"

Dio decides to take a different route then.

"But you want to be a father."

There's a tell-tale silence before the shuffling of sheets -- Jonathan shaking his head. Does he know he is lying, Dio wonders, as he feels his hand being clasped.

"I used to," Jonathan says, "But not anymore."

"Fatherhood suits you," Dio murmurs, kissing him.

"Certainly better than you. If I had children I would let them believe in fairytales."

"You mean you'd coddle them to the point of suffocation," Dio corrects.
"Better to be coddled than to doubt your parents' love."

"Doubtful."

The thing is, despite his jokes and professions to the contrary, Jonathan has Plans. Even if he does not have plans for marriage, he has plans for children. What to name his son, what to name his daughter, what games he would play with them, what gifts he would get for their birthdays, what color their first dresses should, and so forth -- all of which is far more than Dio's ever thought on the subject and he's been in the company of Cross' wife just as much.

Caught with the need to touch, he reaches out to pull Jonathan close.

If Jonathan is surprised with the sudden embrace, he does not show it. Only sighs softly and pets Dio's hair.

But Dio -- Dio still remembers his promise. The need to be everything wars with the need to provide everything, until Jonathan's voice and touch pull him out of it.

"...switching between business and academia," his cousin finishes saying. Something on his concerns with mixing the two no doubt.

"Cross that bridge when you come to it," Dio yawns, "But I think you can balance both, with practice."

"I guess I'm just anxious," Jonathan confesses, "I want it to be February already."

"It will," he says, thinking and thinking still. "In time."
The following Friday, Dio pays a visit to his former rugby captain. Ewan Kensington had been the natural choice, between his father's friendship with the late Viscount and his still-steady status as a fiancée-less bachelor.

"A wife for your cousin?" Kensington repeats, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Dio says, as if this were a favor of little consequence, "As he has inherited the title and deeds, I believe it is time he took a wife. Unfortunately, we missed the Boxing Day Gala this year - - "

"On account of mourning, yes, my father said something to that effect." He takes a drag of his pipe, turning to the side to blow smoke from his nostrils, before walking over to the mantleplace. There is a scrapbook nestled underneath the Bible. He sets the book before Dio and then sits back down.

"I must say this is an unusual request. Normally the parents would arrange something like this. Of course, my parents tried but I rejected all attempts. Was your cousin the same?"

"I suppose." Dio flips through the pages of noblewomen. Much like a catalog, they have been sorted by rank and then name, with little notes -- likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and so such -- scribbled in the margins.

"Why do you have something like this?"

"See, this is where meddling parents come in," the rugby captain patiently explains. "My father's secretaries -- well, one of them, at least -- compiles this once a year. It's quite common at our age, I expect the two of us along with your cousin are featured in the women's version of the catalog." He shrugs, taking another drag, "I've told Father I have no interest in these things but he forces me along on three matchmaking sessions per year."

"And these women..." Dio continues, "They are all available?"

"More or less. I suppose some of them might have gotten engaged in the couple months since this has been compiled but I doubt all of them are taken. Here," he takes the book back, "I've been made to memorize most of their factoids. Tell me what kind of girl your cousin would like and I'll try to narrow it down for you."

What sort of woman would Jonathan like? He realizes he has no idea, having never met his cousin's childhood romance. More importantly, could he stand to watch Jonathan fall in love with someone else? He needs to tread carefully he knows, for even if he found a suitable woman, Jonathan would still need to be convinced.

"Blond hair," he says, figuring in lieu of a similar temper, he might as well try to find a similar figure, "Good teeth and blue eyes."

"Hmm..." Kensington flips through the pages, "How about this one?"

Dio tries to imagine the woman at Jonathan's side.

"She's a sight for sore eyes."

"But good teeth. Oh well. How about her?"
"Is she well-read?"

"Well... no." He purses his lips, "I doubt she can read. Ah, this one?"

"Twenty-four years old?"

"Twenty-five, actually."

"My cousin is not yet twenty-one."

Dio has to envisage seven more women dangling by Jonathan's side, each image more repulsive than the one before, until Kensington slams the scrapbook shut and starts laughing.

"My word, Brando," he gasps, refilling his pipe and smacking at his chest, "You do realize you are choosing a wife for your cousin and not for yourself? I swear, your complaints are all the same as mine and both of us sound like women! Here," he stands up again and rummages about in the bureau, pulling out another scrapbook and blowing dust from the cover, "Let me show you want I mean."

The second scrapbook is a collection of bachelors from a couple years prior. Like with their female counterparts, the potential matches are ordered by title and then surname, with an accompanying commendation, a sentence or two. The Kensington brothers are listed side-by-side and someone has drawn an excessive amount of hearts about the younger brother's entry.

"I am going to marry him when I grow up," Dio reads, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh yes, Angela was always very fond of Raymond. This is her book, you see, before they were formally engaged." Raymond was the younger Kensington who was studying music in Vienna; he had mentioned a fiancée back when they were Head and Shoulder. "But see here," Kensington coughs, flipping further, "She has all the complaints we do of everyone who isn't Raymond."

Indeed, the fiancée of the junior Kensington has filled the rest of the book with complaints. Wilcox is "too much of a joker, unable to hold a conversation" while Webb is "far too fat". Cross is "sallow-faced and overly smug" while Donagan "could stand to learn how to smile". These entries must be five years old at least, judging from the lithographs, and he's more surprised than he should be to find Jonathan as an entry. The heir to the Joestar trading fortune, currently enrolled in Chichester. Rumors of an engagement forthcoming; Father is still a widow. The accompanying complaint is as follows: I have asked him to dance but he declined. I suppose he loves another. Lovely eyes, but he looks too German.

Thoroughly unsettled, Dio closes the book.

"So you see," Kensington explains, "If you have someone in-mind, no one will be satisfactory, no matter how well-read, beautiful, or rich. I do not think your cousin is in the same straits; those who are fond of women tend to be fond of their wives. Well, first wives, at least."

"I see," Dio says, still unable to stomach the thought of his cousin taking on a wife.

"Brando," his senior catches his expression then and he flashes a knowing smile, "You ought to mask your contempt better. We are all born of women in the end and even Angela," he laughs and then shudders, "For all her madness, will make a lovely mother."

The difference of course, is that while Kensington loves men and loves his brother, he does not see his brother as a man.
"Thank you," Dio murmurs, placing one catalog atop another and standing up, "I shall ask my cousin for his opinion."

"Induce him to dance," Kensington advises as they're shaking hands, "The women love it."

Jonathan, at least, is in good spirits when he returns to the flat. He has just paid the Viscountess another visit -- she is fully in her third trimester, he announces, and is strongly discouraged from taking the stairs. The child in her stomach is kicking more aggressively now. She will honor her husband's wishes and name the child Clarence, he adds.

Dio is still plagued with thoughts of his cousin's imaginary impending wedding and, seeking reassurance, interrupts him with a kiss. Does Jonathan take note of his state of mind? Does he suspect the reason behind it? Either way, he allows himself to be pushed onto the bed.

"I want," Dio rasps, tugging on the sash of his bathrobe, "To do this properly."

Jonathan does not understand, not yet at least. But he shifts and turns in the direction of Dio's will, and it's good enough for now.

"Wait," he says, finally speaking when Dio is sliding him along the bed, pushing and pulling until his head dangles over the edge. "Dio, wait."

Dio stops at least, though the mania does not waver.

"What?" He's already hard and they both know it.

"What... what do you want me to do?" Dio could probably finish just rutting against him, for how debauched his dear cousin manages to look even while fully dressed. But after seeing the other man marked down in some already-engaged woman's book like a discarded garment...

"Lean your head back and open your mouth." He gets off of Jonathan then, throwing the robe to the side.

"Wait, wait, wait -- what are you going to do?"

"I am going to finish in your mouth."

"What! But -- but you've already done that."

"Properly."

Jonathan furrows his brows, but he relents in the end. He opens his mouth and relaxes his jaw and Dio bends forward slightly, trying to account for the difference in heights, only for Jonathan to stop them again.

"Wait, Dio, can you... put something in my mouth?"

This time, he cannot hold back a laugh.

"Soon, Jojo. Soon."

"No, I mean..." Jonathan looks away, "Well, what if I laugh?"

"Why would you laugh?"
"Well... sometimes you make strange faces." Jonathan wisely refrains from saying Dio was *constantly* making strange faces.

Dio makes one now.

"I do not."

"Yes you do. You're making one now."

"No, I'm not. Just open your mouth and close your eyes then."

Jonathan rolls his eyes but does as told, though he does mutter 'the things we do for love'.

Right as Dio is passing through his lips, a thought occurs and he stops, pulling out.

Jonathan opens his eyes, frowning.

"What is it now?"

"Jojo, if you're choking... clap your hands and I'll stop."

It is the last straw: Jonathan falls off the bed laughing. Dio crosses his arms, huffing, and refuses to help the other up much less cover himself.

"Are you done yet?" he asks, when the worst of the giggles have subsided.

"Yes," Jonathan gasps, crawling back on the bed and into position, "Yes, Dio, I'm sorry." He claps twice for demonstration. "So... that?"

"Yes," he exasperates, wondering where he went wrong in life.

"Alright." Jonathan closes his eyes, "I'm ready."

"Breathe through your nose and relax your jaw."

"Mmph."

Slowly, ever so slowly --

He hears himself moaning in a most unbecoming fashion when he is fully sheathed. He can feel everything: the ridges of Jonathan's teeth, the firmness of Jonathan's tongue, even the join of mouth and throat.

Dio manages to gasp a soft 'I am going to move now' before rocking his hips back and forth. Jonathan's hands clench up against the sheets, but he makes no move to clap.

For his part, he makes no effort in dragging it out; even if he had tried, he wouldn't have lasted long. Soon enough he is predictably spilling over and seeing white. When he pulls out, Jonathan chokes, hacking and wheezing and needing Dio's help to sit up. In between the coughs and desperate half-lungfuls of air, he ends up accidentally swallowing.

The second he catches his breath, Dio kisses him with his usual fervency, pinning him to the bed and laving tongue against tongue.

"Dio," Jonathan whines when they break for air, "Dio, that's disgusting."
"I just showered," he shrugs, kissing Jojo again.

Tasting himself in the other man's mouth calms him down considerably, so much so that he allows Jonathan to rise from the bed and wash his mouth.

"Is it so unpleasant?" Dio asks when Jonathan climbs back under the covers.

"I don't like the taste."

"Fair enough." He reaches over to mouth his ear and is delighted to find his cousin aroused. Jonathan is a sweating mess within minutes and he comes with Dio sucking at the spot behind his right ear.

This night, like most nights, end with them sleepy and sated. Jonathan feels his tongue loosening from contentment.

"How do you know these sort of things?" he asks. Mumbles into the pillow, actually.

"Here and there."

"Do you learn them from books? Or people?"

"A bit of both. Why?" Dio wipes the sweat from his forehead, perpetually teasing, "Shall I get you a copy of Fanny Hill?"

Jonathan refuses comment, burrowing further into the sheets.

- - -

Come morning and a lingering question forms on his lips.

"For my birthday," he starts, "Could I -- could we do something unusual too?"

"If you have something in mind, we needn't wait," Dio grins. His smile makes Jonathan's heart skip a beat. It was so good to be in love, he thinks, stealing another kiss.

"No, I haven't thought of anything," he admits, "But I will, promise."

- - -

When all is said and done, Jonathan is an easy person to love. After the sex act especially, Dio is constantly overwhelmed with the need to charm, to satisfy, to please.

Suitably reassured of the other's affections, he determines to call upon the elder Kensington at the first opportunity. Cross would be a father at age twenty-three; surely Jonathan deserved a child before then.

- - -

On the ninth of February, a Saturday, Wilcox pays them a second visit.

"So," he starts, making a throat-slitting gesture, "It looks like I'm next on the chopping block."

The reference is lost on Jonathan.

"I'm getting married," Wilcox explains. He crosses his arms and looks anything but thrilled.
"What! Congratulations!" Jonathan, of course, claps a hand about his shoulder, "Wow, Wilcox, I thought for sure Webb would wed before you -- how long have you been engaged?"

"Since," Wilcox checks his watch, "Three hours ago."

"I... I see..." Jonathan gives Dio a bewildered glance; Dio shrugs in reply. "That's... well, that's wonderful news!"

"Of course you two are invited to be groomsmen again, Webb is coming too of course though he doesn't know it, and -- "

"When is this wedding?" Dio asks.

"In a month's time," Wilcox pauses to open his diary, "Exactly a month, actually. The ninth of March. We'll be having it in London and honeymooning around the world so there's little need for travel arrangements."

"March?!" Jonathan repeats, "But... but that's -- "

"Jojo," Dio warns, too little too late.

"My fiancee is pregnant," Wilcox flippantly says, "And my family has threatened to disinherit me should I fail to take responsibility. My father's exact words were: 'I will not have my first grandchild be a bastard'. So here I am, getting married."

Overwhelmed with the indecency, Jonathan needs to sit down.

"I see he's as delicate as ever," Wilcox drawls, ripping a page from his diary to jot down the time and place.

"He's getting better," Dio tries, only for Jonathan to give a tragic sigh. "Don't be so dramatic Jojo."

"Well," Wilcox gives him the scrap, "Here you go. I'll send out a formal invitation within the week and we'll need to go to a suit fitting of course. Don't bother with the wedding gifts, apparently there's a chance the Queen herself will come."

"The Queen herself...!" Jonathan echoes.

"Well, her favorite son-in-law is one of our chief investors so I suppose she'll come along. Perhaps not," Wilcox shrugs, as if the potential attendance of the reigning monarch were of little importance, and continues with, "Well, she might not, considering the state of my fiancee."

"Debauched, you mean?" Dio quips.

"Dio!"

"Mm, precisely. Well, she's a bit of a wallflower, but pretty enough. You know what they say, a wife is a wife!"

He shakes their hands, accepts a second round of congratulations, and leaves as quickly as he came. Apparently the bride's father had yet to be notified and he needed an afternoon drink before the confrontation.

"I should be more surprised," Jonathan sighs, "But I'm not."

"She must be quite well-off."
"Oh?"

"Well, otherwise they'd just induce a miscarriage."

"Dio...!"

"Believe what you will," he shrugs again, "But you must know prostitutes are paid to do it. Often enough, that is."

"Not that! I mean... that Wilcox would..." he gestures helplessly with his hands, "And before marriage!"

"You've done worse," Dio quips, "Bachelor."

Jonathan opens his mouth and then closes it, unable to find an argument. Then he rubs at his temples, chuckling quietly, "Dio, I'm not even thirty! I'm far too young to be old-fashioned!"

"My dear sweet prudish Jojo," Dio affects, fluttering his eyes while taking Jonathan's face in his hands. "Won't you --"

"Yes, yes," Jonathan laughs, mimicking his cousin, "Need you ask?"

- 

On the afternoon of the fifteenth of February, Jonathan walks back from Hugh Hudson with a skip in his step. He had just given the mock lecture and, despite Murray's warnings that the current undergraduate class was especially unruly (there were twenty students in total, nearly double what the department was used to dealing with), none of them had fallen asleep during his presentation! Dr. Petrie had even sat in for the latter half and had re-extended his invitation for Jonathan to teach, whenever he could manage the time.

More than that, it was just as Dio had said: he found that he was able to balance business and academia, provided he set his mind to each task. He had received word that the first shipment of the year from Gibraltar had been received at Bombay and the successful journey had meant ten thousand pounds! Sure, it was a note on a ledger and more important for banker and accountant, but it was still money that he had helped earn!

He probably even whistles, despite nearly being twenty-one, thinking of all the things to look forward to.

Which is why he's caught completely off-guard when another man slams into his side. Being nearly two meters tall, he's not knocked off his feet, but the force of impact does cause him to stagger.

"Ah, please excuse -- " he's on the cusp of apologizing.

The stranger -- an Oriental man dressed in Oriental robes -- sneers at him before attempting to knock the briefcase out of his grasp.

"Hey!" Jonathan exclaims, tightening his hold, "What are you -- aagh!"

The man speaks rapidly in a foreign tongue, somehow managing to break Jonathan's hold. He seizes the briefcase and forces it open, plucking out the Stone Mask Jonathan had brought for the lecture.
"Hey!" Jonathan shouts, "You can't just -- 

"A piece like this is wasted on someone like you," the stranger sneers, pocketing the mask before leaping onto the roof.

"Come back here! Give back my mother's mask!" Jonathan hollers, clambering onto the roof.

He gives chase for the better part of an hour, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, sliding down tenement walls, and slinking through alleyways. The problem is that he's unfamiliar with the neighborhood and an absolute stranger at first sight. Despite this, he manages to catch up, lunging through an intersection to grab the thief by his sleeve.

"Got you!" he gasps, clutching on tight. "Now look, that is my mother's heirloom. I don't know why you think it important, but -- "

He's cut off a second time by a swift punch to the stomach. He's been tackled by four grown men on the rugby field, but this... this is somehow different. He falls to his knees in the middle of the street, gasping for air, and the Oriental man gives a high-pitched laugh.

"Come find my master at Ogre Street," he taunts, "I'm sure he'd appreciate a chance to claw through a nobleman!"

When Jonathan comes to, he finds himself being heaved to his feet by a constable.

"Jonathan Joestar, is it?" the man asks, rifling through his papers, "What were you doing in these slums?"

"Ogre Street!" he blurts, the past hour rushing back to him. He snatches back his wallet, asking: "Constable, please tell me, where is Ogre Street?"

"Ogre Street?" the man raises his eyebrows, "Well, that's in Whitechapel but a fellow like you shouldn't -- hey! Hey, Lord Joestar...!"

The Stone Mask was the sole item he had from his mother. It was the reason he had pursued archaeology in the first place. He does not know what the Chinaman meant by 'wasted' and he does not care.

"Ogre Street at Whitechapel!" he calls to the first open carriage, throwing a handful of coins.

"Sir, I can't drive there! Not at this time of day! You'd best wait until morning, maybe then you'll -- "

"As close as you can get then!" Jonathan interrupts, "Just point me in the right direction from there. Please," he adds, "A thief has stolen my mother's only relic and I need to get it back!"

"Well," the driver pulls down his hat, "If it's for your mum... I'll get you within two blocks but no closer, you hear?"

"Yes!"

And with the crack of a whip -- they're off.
"This is it," the driver says, nervously looking both ways. Although the street is wide and the streetlights are lit, theirs is the only carriage on the road. "Ogre Street is right up ahead sir."

"Thank you so much," Jonathan beams, pulling down his cap and giving a couple more crowns. He ignores the driver's 'oh no, sir, I couldn't possibly take this -- I'm the one driving you to your death!' and hops out.

"Sir!" the driver calls, right before Jonathan breaks into a sprint.

"What is it?"

"You make your mum proud, y'hear?"

"I will." He gives a little wave and another thanks then runs into the darkness.

The change in surroundings in only two blocks is unbelievable. If Jonathan had not known better, he would have doubted that he was still in London. London, the pride of Great Britain, the most modern and industrialized city of them all! But here, amongst the hoodlums and haggards, he wonders if they have ever seen an electrical light in their lives.

There are no streetlights on Ogre Street, but there are shadows aplenty regardless. He pats his own pockets for a set of matches, only to remember he had set them aside during his lecture.

He walks and he walks and he walks. Though he had pride in his sense of direction, without signposts or lights, he might as well be wearing a blindfold.

"Another dead end..." he mutters to himself. Though the moon is full, only a sliver of light makes its way through the cramped and oddly-angled buildings, just enough to see faces on the walls. Jonathan bites the inside of his cheek, steadying his nerves, only to leap back in slack-jawed terror when a cat bounds out of the darkness.

He swears the animal had been clutching a puppy in its jaws.

More twists and turns and more dead ends and with each step, the cloying sense of alienation grows. Although he can only hear his own footsteps (and oh, how meekly he does step!), he cannot shake the feeling of eyes. Gazes, even. But each time he turns -- turns and turns and turns -- there are only shadows on walls to be seen.

"Excuse me?" he calls out when his watch shows that it is ten to ten, "Is anyone there?"

He should have sent a messenger to Dio, telling him he would be late. But then, perhaps Dio would be running late too. He is not able to dwell on that train of thought.

"We are here," a man's accented voice announces from the shadows.

"But the question is," a second man continues.

"Why are you?" -- the third man at least speaks with a British accent.

Jonathan peers into the night.

"I -- "
"Mirstur Nobleman," it's the second voice, but the speaker has moved up. "You're not looking for trouble, are you?"

"We've had enough bloodshed as it is," the third voice declares, "Turn back now and we will let you leave in peace."

"I'm not looking for trouble!" Jonathan insists. In retrospect, he has no idea why he felt irritation instead of fear. "I'm here because an Oriental man has taken something of my mother's!"

All three men share a cackle at his response.

"A momma's boy!"

"I bet he still sucks on her teat!"

"Yeah, and -- "

The third insult never finishes for Jonathan gives a roar, punching blindly into the darkness. Though his fist connects with brick four out of five times, dumb luck makes him hit the first man on the fifth try. He falls forward with a high-pitched scream, tumbling out from his perch and onto the cobblestone floor.

"Insult me as you like!" Jonathan shouts, "But don't dare sully my mother's name!"

"Tattoo! Make mincemeat of him!"

"Mirstur, I'll slice you up real good!"

No time to think, no time to reason -- and the last time he had engaged in proper fisticuffs had been in Chichester! He's unable to dodge the knife and the kick knocks the air out of him, but he does manage to --

"You're crazy!" the man known as Tattoo hollers, trying to wrest his blade away, "Blocking my knife with your hand?!"

"I'm fighting for something more important than a few fingers," Jonathan replies. The pain sends a burst of adrenaline through his veins and he takes a deep breath. Tattoo is sent flying into the wall courtesy of a well-connected hit.

The first man he had punched comes flying again. Jonathan punches him a second time and, now that he is up close, he can see the man is Chinese.

"You there!" he addresses, clumsily brandishing the knife, "You should know -- where is the other Chinese man?"

"This is why I hate nobles," the third man sneers, "They come in here high and mighty and the second you try to show them what's what -- bam! You think you're better than us because you've got land and money? You're no better than trash!"

There's the glint of metal in his hat -- or perhaps he is seeing things.

"Wait!" Jonathan tries, though he places his arms before his head pre-emptively, "I'm really not here to fight! All I want to know is where the man who took my mother's Stone Mask is!"

With an accusation of "You're not bluffing your way past me, rich boy!" the third man readies his hat.
Jonathan fights back the urge to recoil -- just as he had suspected, the man had hidden blades in the brim of his hat! -- swinging the knife so that the man was forced to dodge.

"Hahaha! Amateur!"

He grits his teeth as the hat brim cuts into his flesh. Though he manages to bat it away at the last second, his assailant mistakes the metal hitting pavement to be the sound of snapping bone.

Were this a proper match, he would not be allowed to strike. Interrupting another man's gloating was against the rules. But there is no ring and there are no rules: he sends the third man flying with another well-placed kick, practically keeling over himself to catch his breath.

It's a bad idea -- like this whole nighttime expedition, if he's honest -- and dozens more gangsters creep out of the night. He sees the gleam of machetes, sickles, axes and hammers, and even an old-fashioned blade.

For a terrifying second, he thinks: 'this is it'.

"Stop!" the third man hollers from his place on the floor. Everyone freezes, Jonathan included, as they watch the man stand up. He cannot believe his ears -- could it be that this man who had just called him the lowest of the low was now referring to him as a gentleman? And even vouching for his safety?

"Tell me," the authority figure who introduces himself as Speedwagon prompts, "Why didn't you attack me with full force? A kick from those legs could have easily broken my bones!"

Had he not kicked at full force? Jonathan cannot remember.

"And my friends too," Speedwagon continues, "You could have knocked them out at least, or even used Tattoo's knife! But you didn't. Why?"

It is his use of the word 'friends' that causes Jonathan to speak truthfully. He had always believed Dio, that the miscreants who lived in the slums of London had no one to answer to and thus answered to no one. To know that even on Ogre Street, in the thickest den of thieves in Whitechapel, there was still a sense of hierarchy and camaraderie, Jonathan hedges his bets on the other man's better nature.

"I am here for my mother," he says. This is true. "So the moment I kicked you, I realized you must have one too. A mother, a father, siblings and friends. People who would mourn you if you were hurt." Well, he hadn't thought of it during the kick, but now he was thinking of it.

"That's --"

"That's so naïve!"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"Quiet!" Speedwagon commands, "You two, take Tattoo and Ran-Bo back to their homes! And you -- " he turns to Jonathan, readjusting his hat, "What's your name?"

"Jonathan. Jonathan Joestar."

Despite the wound on his hand, he shakes firmly.

"I'm Speedwagon. Robert Edward O. Speedwagon. And -- eesh," he wipes the blood from his own
hand and digs around in his pockets, pulling out a handkerchief to wrap about Jonathan's hand, "I'm sorry for judging you as quickly as any copper'd judge us. Here, let me take you to the hospital. It's a pity the snow's gone or else we could've packed your arm about it."

"My wounds can wait," Jonathan maintains, not at all affected by the bloodloss, "As I said, I'm here looking for a relic of my mother's that an Oriental man stole."

"Determined as well as a noble, I like it!" he ties a double knot then pulls out another piece of cloth for Jonathan's arm. "Alright then, there's only one Chinaman I can think of who'd come and go like that. Nasty piece of a work, a poison seller."

"Do you know where his shop is?"

"I'll do you one better. Men, come on! Let's help this gentleman get back his mother's relic!"

As the other inhabitants of Ogre Street give a rousing cheer, Jonathan feels his heart soar.

"Thank you -- thank you so much!"

---

Back at the flat, Dio continues to pace.

What with his plans to celebrate Jonathan's first lecture over drinks and dinner, he had left the firm early, arriving back at half past five.

It has been five hours since then, and there's still no sign of Jonathan.

The lecture had been from three to five, this much he was certain of. It was possible Jonathan had gone out with his fellow archaeologists for dinner and drinks, but his lot was far too bookish to drink the night away!

Was there some errand Jonathan needed to run? He would have known, certainly!

When the clock strikes eleven, he dons hat, coat, gloves, and boots, hurrying down the stairs. He does not know what he expects to find in the two kilometers from their flat to Hugh Hudson, only that there's no sign of his cousin.

The university library is already closed and the only pub still serving drinks -- named after the school's founder -- is filled to the brim with undergraduates. Dio sticks his head in the mess of students nonetheless, craning in all directions.

"Jojo!" he shouts into the night air. A gaggle of drunken students on the other side of the street holler back.

The worry keeps him from feeling foolish and he walks from Hugh Hudson to Fitzroy and back two more times, shouting his cousin's nickname every hundred steps.

He receives no answer of course and ends up returning to the flat.

Waiting, always waiting.

The silence reminds him of his childhood, in the twelve years before meeting Jonathan. He had constantly been waiting in the inn, first for his parents to finish tending to the guests, then for the guests to come. And then finally for the creditors to take all they had only for the greedy bastards to demand more. He has not known helplessness for years, but it settles into his bones with the
familiarity of an old friend. He needs to take a series of deep breaths, reminding himself that his
cousin was, despite his naïveté, actually quite self-sufficient. Jojo was nearly twenty-one years old,
he had inherited the estate at last, and he was on-track to being a businessman and gentleman-
archaeologist. He would not pursue something foolish; he would not place himself in danger.

The clock reads a quarter to midnight.

"Two hours," he says for his own benefit, "And then I'll go to the police."

- Jonathan, meanwhile, has allowed Speedwagon and his two dozen man posse to lead him to the
Oriental poison seller's shop.

"Wang Chan!" Speedwagon calls, "Wang Chan, I know you're in there! Come out!"

There's the same high-pitched cackle Jonathan heard in the afternoon.

"Customers at this hour?" the merchant asks, "Oh, come in, come in!"

"Wang Chan, this gentleman here says you've stolen something from his mother!" Speedwagon, of
course, crosses the threshold and stomps into the lower chambers. Halfway down the stairs he
staggers back, retching.

"Dear God," Jonathan mutters, covering his nose and mouth, "Is that -- "

"Mr. Joestar, you'll want to stay behind. Like I said, this guy is a nasty piece of work."

"But then those are -- "

"Bodies, yes." He throws open the gilded door, revealing a candlelit underground room. Wang
Chan is kneeled before a shadowed figure.

"Urgh..."

"Mr. Joestar! Do you want your mother's mask or not?"

"I do!" Jonathan snaps to attention, fighting off the urger to vomit. Don't look, don't look down, he
tells himself. Littered around the floor are various body parts.

"Ah," Wang Chan greets, turning to face the troop of intruders, "Master, this is the man I was
telling you about. The one who studied the mask."

"Speedwagon," the enthroned man drawls, ignoring Jonathan entirely, "How like you, to meddle in
my affairs once more."

"Ripper," Speedwagon spits, and Jonathan cannot believe his ears, "I thought we killed you!"

Master and servant share an eerily similar chuckle.

"You drove me out for a bit," Jack the Ripper stands up then, allowing the candlelight to illuminate
his burn scars, "But I told you I would return."

"Is that your mother's mask?" Speedwagon hisses.

"Yes." Said relic was dangling from the infamous criminal's mask.
"Jack!" Speedwagon declares, "Tonight I'll put a stop to you for good! And take back Mr. Joestar's mask while I'm at it!" And then he turns to Jonathan, adding, "Mr. Joestar, with your injuries you'll want to stay back -- this guy is even worse than the papers say!"

"Joestar, is it?" Wang Chan laughs.

"Quiet," Jack the Ripper raises one hand, displaying the marks on his shoulder and neck. "Do you see that? That's from when you pushed me into the boiler."

"I should have slit your throat while I was at it!"

"And you lot," the Ripper turns to Speedwagon's friends, "Why are you still following this coward around? Can't you see that he's in cahoots with the coppers and nobles? If it were up to him, people like us would stay in Ogre Street all our lives!"

"You shut yer damn mouth!"

"We've seen what you've done!"

"Yeah! Speedwagon here's worth ten of you!"

"No, twenty!"

The serial killer's marred features distort themselves further as he snarls. Finally, he turns to Jonathan.

"And what do we have here? A nobleman?" his gaze trails to the haphazard tourniquet and he licks his lips, "And a wounded one at that."

"Mr. Joestar -- !"

It is only because of rugby that Jonathan can dive to the side without thinking. The Ripper's famed claws sink into the wall where his neck would have been.

"Little lord, don't run."

"Mr. Joestar, watch your back!"

"Wang Chan, deal with these meddlers. I'd like to speak with the nobleman here. Joestar, hmm?"

"Don't speak my name," Jonathan retorts. "It would be tarnished, even passing through your lips." His skin is crawling and he regrets not holding onto Tattoo's knife. As it is, Jack the Ripper doesn't scowl or even laugh.

"I expected as much," he shrugs, "Noblemen are all the same after all. But I will make you a deal: a quick death in return for your knowledge of this mask."

"I would never!"

"It is a most curious thing, you know?" the way the Ripper speaks -- this is someone who has been educated, Jonathan can tell. It's all the more sickening, knowing that someone who could read and write, like him, chose this sort of life. "It speaks to me in my dreams. It tells me to wear it if I desire more power. But nothing happens, even when I place it on my face. Curious. Most curious."

Jonathan swallows, taking a step back.
"And," his fingers clasp around the candleholder, "What is it you want? If the mask does give you power?"

"I want to drown all of England -- no, all the world -- in blood." He says this without a trace of madness and it is because of his answer that Jonathan can act without hesitation. With a animalistic grunt, he lobes the candlestick in the Ripper's face and kicks the other man in the chest.

Though Jack the Ripper howls with pain, he's up on his feet in seconds, making mincemeat of five of the other men before he seizes Speedwagon and places his claws against the leader's jaw.

"Five seconds," he intones, "You have five seconds to tell me how your precious artifact works."

"Mr. Joestar, don't! You can't give this madman more power!"

"I really have no idea!"

"Four seconds."

"Save him, please!" one of the ruffians begs, "He's all we've got!"

"I want to, but I --"

"Three seconds."

"Mr. Joestar, look away!"

"Two seconds. Wang Chan, break this interfering idiot's hand, will you?"

"With pleasure!" The poison seller's chuckle is drowned out by Speedwagon's scream.

"Stop!" Jonathan shouts, diving towards captor and captive, "Stop it! I really don't know! All I know -- all I know is that spikes extend when it comes into contact with blood!"

"Spikes, hmm?" Jack the Ripper heaves Speedwagon over; he crashes into Jonathan and they both tumble to the floor. "Interesting."

"Mr. Joestar, is that really just a mask?!"

"I thought it was!" Jonathan screams, right as Jack the Ripper slits a sixth man's throat. There's a near blinding flash of light followed by an immense surge of power that knocks nearly everyone off of their feet.

"Yes!" Wang Chan chants, "Yes, Master, yes!"

With his good hand, Jonathan shields his eyes, squinting into the darkness when the bright burst faded. Something seized him then, like a suddenly-awoken sixth sense. Was it his mother's spirit, the same curiosity which had caused her to purchase the mask? Either way, he scrambles to his feet and pulls Speedwagon up.

"We need to run," he says.

"Run?! But that's just a --"

In the blink of an eye, three of the men are killed. Their heads are removed and their necks erupt with a geyser of blood. Jonathan cannot see it, but he feels the blood splatter against his face.
"Run, run, run!" he screams, dashing up the stairs.

In between Wang Chan's laughs and Jack the Ripper's gloats, it is absolute madness. How do they manage to make it out alive? Jonathan does not know. With blood pounding in his ears and his feet drumming out a rhythm on the cobblestones, he and Speedwagon beat a shameful and hasty retreat.

Later, the press will cover up the carnage. Of the twenty-five men who had accompanied Jonathan and Speedwagon into the lair, only four made it out alive. The policemen, arriving on the scene, would toss the bloodshed off as gang violence. How was it possible, they naturally reasoned, for any individual, no matter how cruel, to stand up to two dozen armed men? Furthermore, as Jack the Ripper had made no movement for months, it was in their interest to keep the public at peace. They clean the bodies up and dump them in some burial. Not in the Thames, at least.

"Ogre Street?!!" Dio shouts, slamming his fist into the constable's table, "What the hell was he doing going to Ogre Street?!!"

"I don't know Sir, I tried to talk him out of it, I swear! He had been lying on the pavement in Knightsbridge for at least an hour before I was called over and I -- "

"Shit," he spits and curses, grabbing his hat. Jojo wouldn't last an hour in Whitechapel, never mind six!

"Mister Brando, where are you going?!"

"To look for my cousin obviously! And you better pray -- " he grabs the bulkier man by his lapels, easily lifting him from his seat, "That I find him in one piece or else I will -- "

He does not get to finish his threat thankfully as a junior policeman runs into the office having come from a long sprint. Dio releases his hold and steps back, trying to calm himself down, trying to think of a plan. Plan?, his conscience wrings out, What good was a plan when Jonathan might very well be dead?!

"Constable! Constable, you need to come see this!" he whispers something in his superior's ear.

"Mister Brando, you'll want to come too. It seems they've found your cousin."

"Is he -- "

"Alive, yes. But in pretty bad shape. We'll take the horses, can you ride?"

"Of course."
Jonathan comes to with his right hand in yet another brace and his left arm swathed in bandages. There's a grogginess no amount of blinking will shake off, a tell-tale sign of laudanum, and he struggles to sit up.

"Mr. Joestar!" Speedwagon dashes to his side, using his good hand to stuff pillows and sheets behind the other man's back, "How are you feeling?"

"Speedwagon! Oh, you're safe -- thank God!" he twists his head to check the other man's hand, giving a sigh of relief to see it in a cast, "And your bones? Have they been set?"

"As soon as we were admitted. It was only because of you we managed to make it out of there alive," he shakes his head, laughing distractedly, "A part of me doesn't want to believe it. The man known as the Ripper... he was always stronger than any one man -- it took five of us to lure him into the damn boiler! -- but just now..."

The two of them share a shudder.

"This is my fault," Jonathan says, hanging his head, "If I had never insisted that you show me the way..."

"No, no, your mother's mask wouldn't have been stolen in the first place if we had made sure to kill that psychopath."

"But without me, he never would have activated the mask!"

"Perhaps. But if blood is all it takes, it would've been a matter of time. You saw the bastard's lair Mr. Joestar, and I'm sorry you had to see that. People like him..." he shakes his head, "They've got no remorse. There's something wrong with their souls."

"He told me he wanted to drown all the world in blood." Speaking of the other man now, what with the coming of the dawn, the occurrences of the night seemed like madness. "I fear he's telling the truth. I'm scared that the power the mask gave him -- the power I helped him receive -- will aid him in his goal."

"I didn't think he was still alive," Speedwagon repeats, "If I had... I would have never brought my men. Mr. Joestar, and I'm sorry you had to see that. People like him..." he shakes his head, "They've got no remorse. There's something wrong with their souls."

"I'm sorry. It was because they were trying to help me that -- "

"But there's nothing wrong with helping your fellow man!" Speedwagon shakes his head emphatically, "It's just people like him that punish others for doing good. Mr. Joestar, I tell you this in confidence, but as soon as I'm out of the hospital, I'll need to find him again. More than allies, those men were my friends." He breathes deeply, using his good hand to wipe away tears. "It was my responsibility to see them through the night -- I don't know what I'll tell their families."

Jonathan's heart sinks and then soars, to know that his selfish pursuit had ended so miserably.

"I'll help you," he promises, "This is as much my responsibility as yours. As soon as we're discharged -- "

"You'll be going home and staying in bed for a week at least," the doctor crisply interrupts. "I don't
know what squabbles you must have been embroiled in to have those injuries, but you should be glad they're neither fatal nor permanent. Lord Joestar, your left arm will be scarred -- "Speedwagon winces here "And Mr. Speedwagon, it'll be two months before you can use your hand."

"Two months?!"

"At the least. Now I've already listened to your wheedling to put you both in the same room," the doctor frowns, "I'm here for a quick check-up, then the police want to talk."

Determined to maintain his spirits, Jonathan makes silly faces throughout his check-up. He's delighted when Speedwagon does the same. Of course it was much easier to look grotesque when you could use both hands, but they managed somehow.

"Is something the matter?" the doctor asks, when they're both holding back laughter.

"Nothing," Jonathan squeaks, "Thank you, doctor."

"Alright, everything seems to be in order. No fever or inflammation at least. Corporal, come in."

"Corporal Smith at your service," the policeman salutes as the doctor takes his leave. "Lord Joestar, I'm sorry for getting you mixed up in all of this. My superior has been alerted and he'll be on his way to take your full account. In the meantime, is there anything I can get you?" he tosses a dirty look at Speedwagon who returns his gaze, "And let me know if you want to press charges."

"Press charges?" Jonathan echoes, "Why would I want to press charges?"

"Well," Speedwagon coughs, "I am the one who caused your wounds."

"But it was a misunderstanding!" Jonathan turns to the corporal, "Mr. Smith, this man saved my life. It's because of me that his left hand is out of commission, if anyone should be pressing charges, it should be him!" In the stupefied silence, Jonathan turns again to Speedwagon. "Mr. Speedwagon, would you like anything?"

"Ah, um. No. No, nothing at all."

"Then we'll wait for your superior, thank you very much."

"Yessir!" the officer salutes, turns around, and walks out the door. Then he peeks in through the doorframe, adding: "Oh, Lord Joestar, I almost forgot, but your cousin is coming with the constable."

"Oh -- Dio!" Jonathan would bury his face in his hands if he could. As it is, he flops back so that his neck was resting against the wall.

"Dio?"

"My older cousin. I completely forgot about him! He's going to be furious."

"Are you not close?" Speedwagon asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh no, we are! We were raised as brothers! He takes very good care of me and I try to return the favor." Jonathan laughs nervously as a terrible idea hatches in his drug-addled mind, "You don't think I could pull off sleeping right now, do you?"

"No," Speedwagon chokes on a laugh of his own, "No, I don't think you could."
"He'll scream at me for days," Jonathan moans, "The last time I cut my hand, he insisted on feeding me! Nevermind that I'm almost twenty-one years old!" He catches Speedwagon's amused expression then and stops his ranting. "What?"

"Mr. Joestar," he shakes his head, smiling ruefully, "you're unlike any nobleman I've ever met. Truthfully, you're like a character from a storybook."

"That's exactly what I was thinking about you," Jonathan exclaims, "Well, I've never met anyone from the slums, but... I've been told all these horrible things about them. How they have no remorse or knowledge of friendship, how loyalty is unknown -- how uncivilized they are!"

"It's funny you should say that, because that's exactly what we think of you folks!"

The two of them share another laugh.

"I'm really sorry about your friends and your hand," Jonathan repeats when he sobers up, "But I meant what I said. I don't think evil like that should go unchecked, and -- "

His pledge is interrupted a second time by Dio bursting through the door and throwing himself on Jonathan.

"Jojo!" he gasps-slash-snarls, "Do you have any idea how -- "

"Dio!" Jonathan beams. Though he's unable to return the embrace, he tilts his head accordingly.

"What are you smiling for you idiot! What the hell were you thinking, walking around in Ogre Street at midnight?!"

"But Dio -- "

"I see you've broken both arms this time," Dio notes with his arms are still wrapped about Jonathan's shoulders, "You were supposed to be at a lecture, how did you even end up in Whitechapel?!"

"Wait, Dio," Jonathan cuts through, "Before you scream at me, I was in the wrong, I know, please, can you -- " he drops his voice, flushing.

"You are hopeless," Dio grumbles, releasing his hold to scratch Jonathan's nose. "Absolutely hopeless."

"Oh, oh, ohhh," his cousin sighs, closing his eyes, "The itch woke me up you know? A little to the left -- yes. Yes, that's it."

Speedwagon tries very hard to keep a straight face. The constable and corporal, who had been standing in the room since Dio had draped himself over Jonathan, trade uncertain glances. Finally, the constable coughs into his hand.

"Lord Joestar? Mr. Brando?"

"Oh -- yes!" Jonathan colors again while Dio smoothly slides off the bed, wiping his hand on the sheets. "Thank you very much for helping my friend and I."

"Just doing our job, nothing more. I'm Constable Reading. I believe you've met Corporal Smith?" he raises a hand to shake before dropping it and clearing his throat. "Anyways, if you're up to it, we'd like for you to recount the events, as best you remember them." On cue, the corporal takes out
a notebook and pencil.

Jonathan looks at Speedwagon. The other man grimaces. The exchange is not lost on Dio.

"How much should I say?" he asks.

"The truth and nothing but the truth, Lord Joestar," the constable instructs.

Speedwagon balls his fists but says nothing, so Jonathan recounts his story. How he had been walking back from his lecture only to be accosted by an oriental poison-seller who had taken his mother's relic. How he had chased the man all the way to Knightsbridge only to be knocked unconscious. How the man had told him to come to Ogre Street, where, after meeting Speedwagon, they both discovered the Chinaman's master was none other than Jack the Ripper. There was something mystical about the Stone Mask, Jonathan continues, for there was a bright flash of light after the Ripper put it on and he seemed to move at superhuman speeds afterwards. When Jonathan finishes, his shoulders sag. He can see it in the policemen's expressions -- they think him mad, or at least speaking in hyperbole.

"I see," Constable Reading says, taking the notebook from his subordinate's hands. There was a single line written: 'this man is bloody bonkers'. He gives a chuckle before closing the journal. With as much kindness as he can muster, he touches the Viscount's shoulder. "I'm sorry you had to go through such an experience Viscount, and I promise our best men will be on the lookout. We'll certainly post an advertisement for your mother's mask."

"I'll get right on it, sir!" the corporal salutes.

"But -- " Jonathan weakly tries. "But what of Jack the Ripper? Surely he's more of a threat?"

"It's been a long night," the constable says, stepping back and adjusting his helmet, "Even for a man like yourself, those are some pretty serious wounds. Listen to what the doctor says: get some rest. Let me know if you have anything else to say. Mr. Brando, I trust you'll be staying with your cousin?"

"Yes."

"Understood. The corporal will take the second horse back then."

"Thank you."

The constable bids the Viscount and his cousin goodnight before catching up with his subordinate.

Back in the hospital room, Speedwagon snorts.

"Coppers, I hate them. There was a time when we called for them, you know? But they're fools, the lot of them! Refusing to believe the facts, even when it's right before their eyes."

"Dio," Jonathan asks, "Dio, you believe us, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Dio soothes, helping Jonathan lie down, "And I'm sure the policemen do too." Pre-empting his cousin's argument, he continues with: "Remember that you are an archaeologist first and foremost and leave the policing to the police."

"But...

"Jojo. Sleep."
Jonathan sighs and closes his eyes, only to sit up within seconds.  

"Oh!" he exclaims, gesturing to Speedwagon, "I haven't introduced you, I'm sorry! Speedwagon, this is Dio, Dio Brando. My older cousin, a lawyer. Dio, this is Speedwagon, Robert E. O. Speedwagon. He saved my life and dragged me to the hospital."

"It's my fault that Mr. Joestar is in his current condition."

"No, no, it was an honest mistake."

"A lawyer and an archaeologist, hm?" Speedwagon laughs, shaking Dio's hand, "I was wrong, Mr. Joestar. It seems you get along well."

Jonathan grins and then sticks his neck out.  

"Dio, could you scratch my forehead too?"

"Alright," he rolls his eyes, doing as told, "But you really need to get some sleep. It's already four."

"What about you?"

"I'll be staying of course. Who knows how you'll try to break your neck next..."

"But Dio! What about work?"

"It's Friday. Well, Saturday now." He turns to Speedwagon then, "And what of you?"

"What of me?"

"Will you be staying the night?"

"Considering this is a shared room, yes."

"Ah. I see. Well then," Dio stands up, "I'll get something to drink. Jojo, cocoa as usual?"

"Yes please," Jonathan mumbles, eyelids already heavy.

"And, ah, Speedwagon. Would you like anything?"

"Oh! Uh, tea. Tea is good, thank you."

"Sorry about Dio," Jonathan sleepily apologizes, "He's no good around strangers."

"Not at all," Speedwagon reassures, "It's just that..."

"Hm?"

How was he to put it into words?  

"I'm just surprised." Despite the other man's speech and dress, he could still smell the slums on him.  

"Surprised?"

"It's nothing. Good-night Mr. Joestar."

"Mmm. Goodnight."
Speedwagon is discharged from the hospital on Sunday; Jonathan is discharged on Monday. He insists on helping the other man home and playing a voice of reason to the two bickering cousins. But, he soon discovers, there is a cadence to their conversation which makes it hard to intervene.

On the carriage:

"Which doesn't explain what you were doing there in the first place -- "

"I told you it was to get the Stone Mask!"

"But couldn't you have waited? Or told me?"

"I don't need your help for everything!"

"I remember you needing my help to scratch your nose!"

Up the stairs:

Jonathan exhales, nostrils flaring. It was one thing to spend quality time with his cousin; to have Dio hovering over his shoulder for fourty-eight hours was a different matter entirely.

"Dio. I'm sorry I made you worried, but I'm fine, really."

"You can't move either of your arms! How is that fine?!"

"I'll manage! And look," to demonstrate, he wiggles the fingers on his left hand, "See? I can move one hand just fine."

"Thank you Jojo," Dio drawls, "I may now rest easy knowing that you'll be plucking out 'twinkle twinkle' while falling to certain death."

And even when they're inside the flat!:

"My arms are broken, not my legs!"

"How do you expect to lock the door, pray tell?"

"If I may be of assistance," Speedwagon volunteers, clearing his throat. Jonathan beams and Dio scowls.

"Yes! Yes, Speedwagon can help me around."

"Jojo, don't you think you've imposed enough?"

"It's no imposition at all!" Speedwagon replies, "It's my fault that Mr. Joestar's hand and arm are in that sorry state, it's the least I can do."

"Thank you Speedwagon. See, Dio? I'll be fine." Jonathan flexes his fingers, making an effort to push his cousin, "You've already wasted the weekend because of me, don't miss work on top of that!"

Dio shifts his glare from one reprobate to the next before throwing up his hands.

"Fine," he snaps. "But if you so much as step foot out of the flat... or if you don't stop him at every
opportunity -- "

"Yes, yes," Jonathan trills, smiling winsomely. He even has the cheek to wave when Dio is finally exiting the front door. There's the stomping of steps down followed by the stomping of steps up.

"Swear it," Dio demands.

"What?"

"Swear that you won't leave the flat."

"But what if it catches fire?"

Dio stares at him.

"Dio," Jonathan whines, "I'm hurt."

"You'll be hurting a lot more if I catch you outside," his cousin growls. "Now swear that you won't leave the flat."

"I swear I won't go outside," Jonathan recites.

"Good." There's the slam of the door and more footsteps, followed by the opening and closing of the main entrance.

"I see you weren't exaggerating when you said he took good care of you," Speedwagon mutters. Then he catches Jonathan's expression. "Mr. Joestar...?"

"It's for the greater good," Jonathan shrugs, pulling left hand out from underneath right and flippantly uncrossing his fingers.

Speedwagon puts two and two together, blanching.

"Mr. Joestar...!"

"I told him I could move my fingers," Jonathan gets up, stretching his legs. His expression turns serious, dark even: "Dio doesn't believe us and to be honest, I'm relieved. I don't want him involved. But that doesn't mean I'll sit around. Even if I were bound to a stretcher, I would want to see the end of this."

Speedwagon's heart swells.

"You're a good brother," he says, patting the other man on the back.

"I should hope so." Jonathan smiles again, "Could you get my pocketbook and wallet? We should be off to Whitechapel."

"Whitechapel?" Speedwagon repeats as he ducks into Jonathan's bedroom, "Why would you want to go back there? There's no chance either of those two are still there."

Jonathan looks at him oddly before saying: "To apologize to the families of the men he's killed of course."

Speedwagon does not know why he's surprised. It seems he can't stop being surprised, being in this bizarre nobleman's company.
"You're the strangest fellow I've ever met," he says again, clapping a hand on Jonathan's shoulder before wiping tears from his eyes, "But a good man, no question."

In addition to knee-jerk concern, Dio has another reason for wanting Jonathan to stay put -- namely, his own excursion into Whitechapel. After ascertaining that his cousin had suffered another bout of flesh wounds and would certainly recover, his mind races with another issue of Jonathan's story: the Chinese poison seller.

Though it was possible it was a different poison seller, the chances were too slim for his liking. And now that the man had seen Jonathan's face -- and could recognize him as the man who studied the Stone Mask -- he's become a dangerous loose end.

Why hadn't he killed the man when he bought the first round of poison for Mr. Joestar? Because he needed the second round. But then why hadn't he killed him after purchasing the second round?

Dio knows full well why: instinctively, he knew he might need the apothecary's unique concoctions a fourth, or would it be fifth?, time. There were other poison sellers of course, but none so discreet. He would need to hide his identity better if he wished to make use of their services.

He feels mildly ridiculous, wearing a mask while walking in Whitechapel in broad daylight. But he cannot be recognized, not now. A simple slitting of the throat will do, he reasons. It will be the first time he's really killed someone and will likely be messy. But it was Whitechapel, and Ogre Street at that -- what was one more dead immigrant in the grand scheme of things?

As he plays with the dagger and maintains his pace, his thoughts return to Jonathan, or more specifically, the vagrant he had brought back. Speedwagon is an oddity, a genuinely good man who had somehow managed to flourish even in the depths of Ogre Street. He was their senior by half a decade and had made a name for himself while Dio was still a resident of the slums. Even back then, he had studiously steered clear of the man for the same reason: they had vastly different methods of dealing with things.

That Speedwagon had nearly maimed his cousin, only to be brought completely to his side... of course Jonathan could prance about, attracting the best people in the worst parts of London on personality alone. There's an undercurrent of pride, though he stifles it quickly. Jonathan could be outstanding in archaeology; he had no business attracting attention in the slums.

Judging from Jonathan's recounting, Speedwagon was as much a meddler as Dio remembered. If he poked his nose in the wrong places or, heaven forbid, intended to seduce his cousin... well. One problem at a time, he reminds himself, opening the door to the apothecary.

"Excuse me?" he calls, taking care to sound uncertain. "Is this an apothecary?"

There is no response.

He sheathes the knife and calls a couple more times before proceeding into the lower chambers. The policemen have made quick work of the bodies, though the smell and bloodstains remain. He thinks back to his cousin's story and tries to imagine the scene.

The throne -- there. Jonathan, against the wall. The Stone Mask dangling from the Ripper's own mask. And --

Dio brushes his fingers against a mark in the wall. Bits of brick fall out.
This was where the Ripper had tried to kill Jonathan. Which meant there -- the empty candleholder -- that had been where Jonathan struck back.

If the Ripper had recoiled and then grabbed Speedwagon then...

His gaze settles to the left of the throne where there is -- nothing. No bloodstains, no skid marks, no scratches. Nothing. This must have been where Jack the Ripper put on the mask. Dio stands where the other man stood, taking off his own mask to better imagine the midnight scene unfolding. If Speedwagon had been thrown into Jonathan and if they both hit the wall, then --

Even with a conservative estimate, there was a good ten meters between Jonathan and the killer. But as Jonathan said blood had been splattered across his face, the Ripper either had to move ten meters in a matter of seconds or crush a limb with enough force so that blood spurted the rest of the distance.

As if on cue, Jonathan and Speedwagon clamber down the steps. There's a frozen moment while the two of them look at him.

"Dio!" Jonathan shouts, snapping him out of the reconstruction.

"Out of the flat already?" he asks, turning to his cousin. While he's checking the time, he crushes his own mask underneath his heel. "It hasn't been five hours."

"Dio, what are you doing here?"

"Recounting what you told the policeman of course." His dear cousin is so easy to read -- as he considers the mask his responsibility, he no doubt plans to pursue the Ripper.

"What?"

"After looking it over," he swallows, "I believe you. Both of you. I think something truly evil was born that night and if the police will not act, then we should."

"No Dio," Jonathan predictably shakes his head, "This isn't your fight. The Stone Mask is my responsibility, not yours."

"Mr. Joestar, think of your own condition!"

"It's because of my condition that I say this. No, Dio, I won't let you involve yourself."

"Since when have I listened to you?" Dio scoffs, crossing the ten meters to tweak Jonathan's nose. "Sorrows and burdens are to be shared as well. Your problems are my problems."

Jonathan opens his mouth to argue only to close it when nothing comes out. Then he wraps his right arm about Dio's shoulder.

Speedwagon blows into his handkerchief while loudly sobbing on the beauty of brotherhood.
"I spoil you," Dio accuses, when it is Monday night and they are both back in the flat.

Unable to move his right hand or left arm, Jonathan is reduced to trembling thighs and muffled groans.

"I shouldn't let you come," his cousin continues, rubbing the edges of his foreskin. Jonathan bucks his hips and Dio kisses his cheek, "At least I should make you wait. Do you have any idea what it was like? I waited eight hours before going to the police."

"I didn't -- I didn't want you involved," Jonathan fights through a quagmire of desire to say.

"You're a fool." But even as he is saying this, his fingers wrap around Jonathan's erection, beginning a slow and steady rhythm that lasts for less than a minute. Stilted gasps are punctuated with the shuffle of sheets as he shirks the rest of his garments to properly rut against the other man. When they're both sweat-covered and spent, Dio wiggles underneath Jonathan's right arm, resting his head against Jonathan's chest.

His is a strange comfort, he knows.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," Jonathan murmurs. With effort, he repositions his bandaged left arm so that his fingers are brushed against Dio's shoulder.

"You're more capable than I give you credit for." This has been true for years. Ever since their last year at boarding school, really. To think the boy who feared becoming his second shadow would end up seizing the spotlight. He stretches upwards, kissing Jonathan's collarbone, then slides back down.

"I worry for you too," Jonathan says, swallowing, "I want to protect you from the Ripper."

How he manages to say this while unable to use either arm, Dio has no idea.

"While it is possible," Likely, even, "That you might fight me to a draw -- "

"Never!" Jonathan declares. "Why would I fight you?"

"Hypothetically."

"You're always imagining strange things."

"I'm imagining your concession right now," Dio grates.

"But didn't I just concede?" Jonathan teases back.

"I want to hear you beg for it."

He feels a shudder run through Jonathan. Had he said too much? Then he hears his cousin wet his lips, restrained fingertips stroking his shoulder.

"Later," he says. "After."

Soon, Dio hears.
Come Wednesday morning and Speedwagon arrives half an hour after breakfast with two weeks’ worth of newspapers bundled beneath his arms. As it is Dio’s free day, the three of them sit at the cleaned-off dining table, sifting through recent articles in hopes of finding some trace of the Ripper.

"This is impossible," Jonathan groans, turning another page. His index and middle fingers are coated with ink.

"Not enough murders?" Dio asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Most of them don't get reported," Speedwagon admits. "Especially immigrants. Only their families will care to mourn."

"Is it possible they've -- the Ripper and Wang Chan, I mean -- left the country?"

"More likely that they're somewhere without the tabloids."

"Mm, yes." He finishes another section and sets it aside, "Have either of you looked at these?"

"Already read," Dio replies. "Here, I haven't gone through these."

"Oh, Nottingham and Hatton's Cross," Speedwagon notes, "I've already read those."

"Is this one good?" Jonathan holds up another front page.

"Not familiar."

"Haven't seen it."

He gets halfway through the third page before the doorbell rings. As one, the three of them look up.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Dio asks.

"Not that I know of, no."

"Careful," Speedwagon warns, "It's possible those two are looking for us, just as we're looking for them."

Dio walks to the window and looks down.

"Oh," he says, "It's Pyrce and Miss Murray."

"Oh!"

"Stay there," he shoots Jonathan a glare, "I'll let them up."

"They're our classmates," Jonathan explains, as Dio goes to the main entrance. There's the sound of greetings and exclamations followed by the trooping of three sets of feet up six flights of stairs.

"Please don't get them involved," Jonathan adds, feebly trying to straighten out the papers.

"Here, Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon takes a stack and shoves it to the side, "Let me help."

By the time Pyrce and Murray reach the front door, Jonathan and Speedwagon have cleaned the
"table considerably."

"Joestar!"

"Mr. Joestar!"

"Miss Murray! Mister Pyrce!"

"God, you look like a wreck," Pyrce sighs, "Brando here told us about your fight."

"Here are flowers and chocolate," Murray adds, setting the items down, "We planned to visit you in the hospital but -- "

"By the time we arrived you were already discharged!"

"Thanks so much!" Jonathan grins.

"Don't encourage him," Dio laments.

"Man though," Pyrce whistles, raising his eyebrows at Jonathan's bandages, "I'd like to see the other guy. I bet you broke every bone in his body!"

Speedwagon coughs.

"Oh, and you are...?"

"R.E.O. Speedwagon, pleased to meet you."

"My!" Murray remarks upon noticing the bandages on his hand, "Were you in the same tussle as Mr. Joestar?"

"In a... sense. Yes."

"Oh yes," Jonathan volunteers at the same time, "It's because of Speedwagon here that I got out with only these injuries!"

"Brando?" Pyrce prompts, "Where were you when this was happening?"

"Back here."

"Worried sick, I suppose," Pyrce appends, not at all affected by Dio's glare.

They spend some time catching up, sipping tea and taking turns with the chocolate. It's the imported stuff, Pyrce disclaims with smears of it on his face, so it needed to be eaten quickly lest it spoil. Speedwagon shows off his talent for impromptu storytelling, grandly recalling a sanitized version of Friday night's events.

Unfortunately, there is little overlap in breaks between the two of them which means Pyrce has a seminar to catch within the hour. To be a judge, he playfully adds, means that one must have perfect attendance. So he picks up his hat and wishes Jonathan and Speedwagon a fast recovery, raising an eyebrow but offering no further comment when Murray is inclined to linger.

Dio shoots his cousin a curious look; Jonathan shrugs. Speedwagon busies himself with the flowers and Murray continues sipping at her tea.

"Mr. Joestar," she stammers, setting down her teacup and trying to maintain eye contact, "I -- I
came to tell you that, well, someone has been asking around the department for you."

"...For me?"

"Yes. I don't know if he knows your name, but he was interested in your work on the Stone Mask." She furrows her brows, adding: "I didn't get his name unfortunately, but I doubt he was an archaeologist."

"Was he an Oriental man?" Speedwagon demands.

"No."

"Oh. Was he British? Obviously a psychopath? Did he have burn scars on his face and neck?"

"Um, no." She looks uncertainly from Speedwagon to Jonathan. "He was... Italian, I believe. He didn't understand French or German but his Latin was quite good."

"Italian?"

"Yes."

"Well," Jonathan starts, "I can't say I know him. But thank you very much for letting me know Miss Murray."

"Oh, it's no problem at all," she stands up, pulling her gloves back on, "I'm sorry for alarming you, I must've been overthinking things. It's just that you were in a brawl and then this strange man was asking for you -- " she shakes her head, as if to banish the thought, "I feared you had gotten caught with the wrong crowd!"

Jonathan is quick to reassure her that her worries were well-intended (though he had not, to his knowledge, been consorting with the wrong crowd) and he would keep a look-out for the mysterious Italian man. She wishes him a quick recovery as well and allows Dio to escort her downstairs.

"What do you think?" Dio asks when the pile of newspapers have reappeared.

"Is it possible the Ripper has an Italian lackey?" Jonathan wonders.

"That could be it," Speedwagon agrees.

"But why would they be pursuing me?"

"Do you think," Speedwagon hesitantly puts forth, "that they need your knowledge of the mask?"

"But I already told the Ripper all I knew about the mask," Jonathan protests, "Everything after that is speculation." He refrains from adding that the final draft of his dissertation had been far drier what with most of his (admittedly outlandish) hypotheses cut out.

"But you're still the one that knows the most about the mask," Speedwagon reasons.

"If only it was something to be proud of..." Jonathan sighs.

They look through two more stacks of newspapers before taking a break, then redouble their efforts after supper. At ten o'clock Speedwagon takes his leave, saying he would snoop around Whitechapel some more. He and Jonathan exchange promises to keep safe and not take any risks alone.
"And keep an eye out for that Italian!" Speedwagon hollers from the ground floor.

-I swear you're enjoying this," Jonathan complains the next morning as they're cramped in the washroom. He is crouched in the bath with both arms raised while Dio is seated at the edge of the bath, running a soaped and sudded towel over his body.

"Did I send you off to Ogre Street?" Dio retorts. "Or did I ask you to break both arms?"

"But I didn't break either of my arms."

"You might as well have." He lifts said arm, scrubbing vigorously, and finishes with a shameless groping.

"I can see you're hard," Jonathan huffs.

"What's there to hide?" Dio asks. He scoops up a bucket of water and gracelessly dumps it over Jonathan's head.

"How do you manage...!"

"Oh I'll finish in your mouth after." And then, when Jonathan flushes, he grins, "I won't make you swallow, is that better?"

"Were you always this perverse?" Jonathan sighs, rubbing the soap from his eyes.

"Always."

-As promised, as soon as he's out of the bath and properly dried off, Dio pushes him to his knees, prying open his mouth and easing his cock inside.

"Mm," he sighs, allowing Jonathan to push him against the wall. "You have gotten better at this."

"I'm falling to your level," Jonathan despair's, when Dio is helping him wash out his mouth. "Can you believe I felt proud of that compliment?"

Dio grabs a fistful of his hair, pulling him forward for a kiss.

"I'm still better," he murmurs, gently sucking on Jojo's bottom lip.

"I guess I'm just lucky," Jonathan grins.

-Despite Dio's scathing demands to the contrary, Jonathan ends up accompanying him out of the flat.

"As soon as we're halfway you are to go right back."

"It just gets so stuffy inside," he sighs, lifting his right arm up in a half-stretch.

As fate would have it, they don't even make it out the square.

Halfway through the path, a man lands on his feet having fallen from the trees.
"Jojo," Dio whispers, pushing the other man back, "Run."

Jonathan is an absolute idiot, Dio fumes, taking back all prior comments regarding self-sufficiency and it was a miracle he was still alive. Instead of concluding, like any normal person ought, that his arm and hand were broken and doing as Dio said, Jonathan actually charges forward.

"Oh ho!" the Italian man greets, moving from a crouch to a jumping grandstand in a matter of seconds. "Jonathan Joestar and his cousin, Dio Brando."

"Who are you?" Jonathan demands, "Are you one of Jack the Ripper's servants?"

A look of irritation flickers across the stranger's face.

"Lord Joestar," he silkily says, drawing his fist back into a punch, "Remember this well: I am no one's servant."

His punch connects and Jonathan is brought to his knees. Dio dashes forward, drawing his concealed dagger, only for the blade to slice through air.

The Italian laughs, leaping back to perch on the surrounding gate.

"Jojo," he kneels beside his cousin, "Jojo, what's wrong?"

Like a fish on land, Jonathan gasps for air.

"You there," Dio stands up, gaze hard, "What did you do to him?"

"I merely pushed the air out of his lungs," the stranger replies. He takes out a sandwich and sprinkles some pepper on it.

"Wait! Dio!"

At his cousin's voice, Dio stops his second charge.

"Can you feel it?" the Italian asks. He takes a bite of his sandwich, munching loudly.

"My arm!" Jonathan exclaims, tearing at his bandages.

"Jojo! What the hell are you -- "

"No, Dio, look!" he unwraps his left arm, tossing the gauze aside and fully flexing his fingers, "The wound is gone! There's not even a scar!"

"And your hand too," the stranger adds.

Sure enough, Jonathan unwraps his right hand and discovers that it too has healed.

"Who are you?" Dio demands again, "And what do you want from us?"

"My name is Zeppeli," the man greets, finishing off his sandwich and licking his fingers. He tosses the pepper shaker up while doing so and snatches it out of the air after examining his hands. "and I have come to tell you that you cannot defeat the Stone Mask with courage alone!"

"How did you -- " Jonathan pauses, re-establishing his priorities, "Thank you for healing me, Mr. Zeppeli!"
"I only corrected your breathing," Zeppeli replies, leaping down and standing before the two of them, "And it was your breathing that healed your hand and arm."

Dio shoots a quick glance at Jonathan. Clearly his cousin was just as incredulous.

"My breathing?" Jonathan repeats, flexing both hands before breaking into a somersault. "I really can't believe it! There's -- there's no pain at all!"

"Believe what you will but know this: I have come in peace. I wish to be your ally, Jonathan Joestar, for I believe we have the same goal."

Jonathan stops halfway through a second somersault, eyes wide.

"You... you're after the Stone Mask too?"

"Yes."

"And you plan to fight it?"

"And win, yes."

"Then please teach me, Mr. Zeppeli." Jonathan clasps his hands together, "Because it's my fault Jack the Ripper learned how to activate the mask and -- and I still can't believe it's more than a decoration."

"Those were my thoughts exactly. Come, Jonathan! Let me show you the way of the Ripple."

"Dio," how does Jonathan manage it? Dio has no clue. But he somehow turns to him and says with a straight face: "I'm sorry I can't walk you halfway. I'll let you know --"

"I'm not letting you follow this man."

"But Dio...!"

"Not alone at least." It unsettles him, if he's honest, knowing the Stone Mask and the stories surrounding it might be a part of some grander scheme. And if Jonathan's innate interest in it was the work of fate... he grits his teeth, "I'll come along."

"But what about work?!"

"It can wait." He touches Jonathan's hand, forcing up a smile, "And wouldn't you say this is more important?"

"Well..."

"You two, hurry it up!"

"Coming!"

- 

"Amazing!" Speedwagon exclaims after Zeppeli had healed his hand too. "The Ripple, was it?"

"Or Hamon, yes."

"Now if you two could step to the side," Zeppeli directs, motioning to the bridge, "I'd like to drill
in some more basics before sunset."

"I can't believe it," Speedwagon restates, blotting out the sun with his outstretched palm. "Every bone in my hand was broken and then, with one punch -- "

Dio can't believe it either. He's pinched himself multiple times throughout the day -- when Jonathan had shirked both sets of bandages, when Zeppeli had broken the stone without hurting the frog, when flowers had bloomed on the withered branch underneath Jonathan's touch. It was the penultimate week of February, far too soon for spring -- to say nothing of spontaneous blossoming!

"He's really something," Speedwagon hums, looking out to the newly-formed duo of teacher and student. Dio follows his gaze, watching Zeppeli and Jonathan throw point-blank punches at one another. Despite having a longer arm-reach, Jonathan ends up losing the exchange. "Your cousin, I mean."

What is he to say to that? He gives a grunt of agreement, averting his gaze.

Mesoamerican relics that turned humans into bloodsucking nightdwellers! Making use of breathing and sunlight to combat said monsters! The whole premise was ridiculous -- if he hadn't seen Jonathan healed within seconds from a punch, he wouldn't believe a word of it.

"Anyways," Speedwagon continues, pulling a scrap of paper from his breastpocket, "I've done some asking around and it seems like these five counties have had multiple unremarked murders."

Dio takes the sheet, quickly scanning it over. It was list of towns, all outside London, half of which he'd never heard of.

"Wait," he pauses, "This is your handwriting."

"Yes?" Speedwagon raises an eyebrow.

"You can read and write."

There's a beat before the other man smiles.

"So can you."

Something in his tone causes Dio to tense. Did the other man recognize him? And if so, from when? Would Jonathan's newfound friend be another loose end to do away with? He forces himself to relax, breathing evenly, and turns back to Jonathan and Zeppeli.

"Forgive me for asking," Speedwagon quietly starts anew, "But the two of you -- are you really cousins?"

"Yes."

"I apologize. It's just that you look nothing alike."

"I take after our grandmother." According to his mother, he also took after his father, but Dio hated having anything to do with that man.

"I see. Have you been with the Joestars long?"

"Eight years." A pause. "Almost nine."

"And before then?"
He turns to the older man, eyes blazing.

"You're a smart man," he drawls, "I'm sure you already know."

"Mr. Brando!" Speedwagon calls, as Dio gets up, shoving his fists inside his pockets. "I really meant no offense!"

Even after he's excused his absence and promised to come the next Wednesday, he finds himself still on-edge.

He was a fool, he knows, to think Jonathan would be disgusted by his past. How easily he had befriended Speedwagon, a bona fide mobster from Ogre Street! And how easily had his camaraderie been returned!

It was just like Jonathan, he thinks again, to feel and inspire selfless devotion towards and from random passerby. The Zeppeli fellow too, though he tended to mince words, clearly thought himself to be Jonathan's teacher.

It is half past ten when he returns to the flat. Though the kitchen and parlor are unoccupied, dinner has been set out for him. He drifts through the other rooms, surprised and then, not at all, to find Jonathan in his bed, face buried in his pillow.

Seeing his cousin curled up like that brings back the tension and anxiety he'd felt for the past week. He needed to keep Jonathan safe, but he also needed the poison seller dead. Dio changes into his nightclothes, forgoing supper to slip into bed. Jonathan gives a soft groan when he's kissed, releasing his grip on the pillow to roll on top of Dio.

There are worse ways to die, Dio thinks. That, and he's too tired to push the idiot off.

"Mr. Zeppeli's father discovered the mask," Jonathan says over breakfast.

"Oh?" Dio has to keep himself from feeding the other man; he had almost forgot both his limbs were healed.

"Apparently he was the first to put it on."

"I see." He settles for wiping the bits of mash from Jonathan's chin.

"He had to kill him," Jonathan shudders. "I can't imagine what that would be like."

"Hm."

"Oh, but...!" Jonathan waves his hands, panicking, "I'm sorry for bringing this up, I'm still so ashamed -- having accused you of that!"

"Of what?" Dio teases, kissing him, "Patricide via poisoning, you mean?"

"Yes," Jonathan looks ill-at-ease. "I'm sorry."

"And I've already forgiven you. Jojo, you were grieving. Even the best of us lose our minds then."

Jonathan picks at his food in silence for awhile before remembering the main point.
"Ah, but as I was saying -- Speedwagon is here to avenge his friends, Mr. Zeppeli is finishing what his father started, and me... well, I'm the one who told Jack the Ripper how to use the mask."

"And you now consider him your responsibility, yes, I know."

"No! I mean -- that's not what I mean." Jonathan fumbles for a more diplomatic phrase, before giving up and speaking his mind: "All of us have a stake in this, a reason to put our lives on the line. But not you. This isn't your responsibility and I can't -- "

Rather than allow Dio to pinch his nose or tweak his ear, Jonathan grabs his cousin's wrist.

"Dio. I'm serious."

"Considering you're planning on hunting a criminal that's eluded capture for months, I would hope you are."

"Dio!"

"Jojo," he sighs, pulling his wrist away and giving Jonathan's nose a smart twist, "Whatever involves you, involves me. You are my responsibility, my stake."

Fork and knife clatter to the floor as Jonathan forcefully kisses him.

"I love you," he whispers, as they are still lip-to-lip, "But I worry for you. I'm scared I won't be able to save you."

"That's enough nonsense for one morning," Dio mutters, clearing his throat and pushing Jonathan away. He adjusts his tie and picks up his briefcase, "I'll see you at the bridge after work."

-  

Constable Reading is an easy man to distract. His safe is an easy one to crack.

Dio slips out of the police station with one of constable's pistols and two boxes of ammunition.

There are easier ways to obtain a handgun, certainly. But then, there is still his flair for the theatric.

One good shot, it's all he needs. Between offensive capabilities which bordered the realm of magical and enough coincidental meetings to be called fate, he is certain the three of them would meet Jack the Ripper again. And if the poison seller was as devoted a servant as Jonathan had described him...

One loose end, he tells himself. One shot, one bullet, and then the whole unpleasant business would be behind him. He could even make it out to be self-defense!

-  

"Side effects?" Zeppeli repeats, when Jonathan and Speedwagon are picking up leaves.

"Yes." Dio continues, "I find it hard to believe there are no drawbacks to these sort of abilities."

"Hmmm..." Zeppeli looks at him, amused. "Tell me, Mr. Brando, how old do you think I am?"

Dio looks the other man up and down. Judging from the tone of his voice, he expected a young age. And looking at him -- from his dress to his physique to his overall mobility! -- Dio would be hard-pressed to put him over twenty-five.
Thinking back to what Jonathan had said about the man, he knows the Italian had lost his father before the Stone Mask fell into Jonathan's mother's possession. How old would he have to be to remember and survive such an event?

"Thirty."

Zeppeli laughs without humor, smacking him on the back.

"I turned fifty-one in January," the other man says. His tone is devoid of pride. With an aged sobriety he adds: "Now I look younger than my own son. You asked about side effects Mr. Brando, well I am the prime exhibit. After using the Ripple too much, I become an artifact in my own right."

- 

It is possible the other man is lying. How on earth could a fifty-year-old man trade blows with Jonathan and win?

But then there is Jonathan's progress -- slow and steady like the man himself. One day Dio sees him relearning how to breathe and then he blinks and sees his cousin walking on water. A veritable undergrowth of flowers follow in his footsteps if he's not paying attention, an inexplicable phenomenon regardless of how fast spring was approaching.

He begins to dream then, of a Jonathan caught for eternity on the cusp of twenty-one.

If Zeppeli really did look younger than his son --

He already looked younger than Speedwagon at certain angles and he was practically double the other man's age!

One night he wakes in a cold sweat with Jonathan's hand pressed to his cheek.

"Dio," Jonathan calls, "Dio, are you alright?"

He kisses him, begging to be touched. Pleading for affirmation that he had not aged. Jonathan gives it to him, soft words and softer kisses, and Dio is momentarily reassured.

The problem then, is that the dream -- and it is never the same dream -- is so vivid. Whether they are in the manor or the flat, out riding horses or sitting near the hearth, across one another at the dining table or side-by-side in bed... there is Jonathan: gorgeous, immortal, eternal. And then there is him, a withered breathing corpse of skin and bone, a wrinkled hand forever reaching.

He falls out of bed and runs to the washroom to vomit.

"Dio?" Jonathan asks, clambering out of bed as well. "Dio, are you alright?"

He wants to cry at the unfairness of it all. How the universe seemed to oppose him at every twist and turn. How was he to remove something as innate as breathing from the other man?

"I'm fine," he says instead, getting up and wiping his mouth, "Something from the lunch at Coward Chance must've disagreed with me."

- 

"Teach you the Ripple?" Zeppeli scoffs. "I'm sorry Mr. Speedwagon, but I can't. Jojo here is one of the lucky few -- a one in ten thousand chance, if not one in one million! See his breathing? His
movements? Things like that can’t be taught, they can only be refined.”

One problem at a time, Dio chides, lining up his shot.

Three shots, three hits. The improvement in accuracy is impressive, especially considering he was still on his first box of ammunition.

While he is reloading the gun, he sees wrinkles creeping over his hands. Pistol and bullet both clatter to the dirt as he vainly checks his palms.

No, he confirms, no, he was not yet old.

He fails to hit anything for the next two rounds.

The first full week of March marks the second week of Jonathan's training. Speedwagon has visited all five towns with unreported murders: three of the murders had been suicide and the other two had been a run-of-the-mill inheritance squabbles concluded with the culprit's confession. Needless to say, there was no sign of Jack the Ripper in any of the five villages.

"Patience," Zeppeli says, "We are as bound to Stone Mask as it is to us. It will find us in the end, so we need not look for it."

The two of them spend half a day on the third for various errands. Wilcox has scheduled a suit fitting and Jonathan had made plans to see the Viscountess.

"A wedding?" she asks, looking at their matching suits.

"Yes! For Wilcox. Ah, he was one of our classmates back in Chichester. If Cross were here, I'm sure -- " Jonathan stops himself and swallows, before flashing a pitiful smile.

"A March wedding," the Viscountess muses, pursing her lips. "It will be lovely, I'm sure."

Did she remember Wilcox as the man who had glued her corset shut? Dio does not think to ask.

"It will, I'm sure," Jonathan agrees. And then, with as much delicacy, he asks, "Will you be...?"

"Attending?" she laughs, rubbing her stomach, "No, there is little chance of that. But play and make merry on my behalf. For my husband and I."

"Yes," Jonathan takes her hand, squeezing it, and Dio cannot help noticing the stretch of skin on her wrist or the permanent crease of her brow, "Yes, we will."

It happens as Zeppeli said it would: Jack the Ripper sends a servant to taunt them. Though it certainly the same man who sold them the poison -- Wang Chan, as Speedwagon calls him -- there is something different about him.

"My master bids you come to Windknights," he intones, leaping three meters into the air as both Jonathan and Zepelli rush at him.

"Not," he sniggers, "that I understand what he wants to do with worms like you." Standing on a
lamppost he looks upon them, breaking into a mad grin upon seeing an old customer.

Dio pulls the trigger then, shooting the other man soundly in the neck. The poison seller falls from his perch with an unearthly shriek, blood splattering everywhere.

He's about to excuse himself, turning to the others, only to have Jonathan bellow:

"Dio! Watch out!"

He's tackled to the floor by his cousin, as if he were a ball and Jojo was in the middle of a try, while Zeppeli unleashes a blast of Ripple energy.

Wang Chan gives another shriek before turning tail into the night.

"Dio!" Jonathan gasps, checking him for injuries, "Dio, are you alright?"

"I'm fine." He makes a show of standing up and brushing himself off. Internally, he's screaming. How had the man not died? His throat had been punctured -- Dio had watched him bleed!

Without meaning to, Zepelli answers his question, noting that the Oriental poison seller had likely been made a true servant of the Stone Mask and was now effectively one of the undead too.

"Boy," he notes, addressing Dio, "When that monster was dashing at you, you didn't even flinch." He whistles, patting Dio's back, "Now that's what I call courage!"

"Windknights, is it?" Jonathan asks, dusting his own palms off. "Where is that?"

"I know of London and little else," Zepelli shrugs.

"Never heard of it," Dio concedes.

As one, the three of them turn to Speedwagon.

"Mr. Joestar! Mr. Brando!" he admonishes, "And you call yourselves Englishmen! Windknights is famous for Windknights' Lot, a prison that opened last year..." he groans, "I can't believe I didn't think to look there -- it's at a perfect defensive location too!"

"How far is it?"

"Half a day's ride."

"I'll call for a carriage then!"

"No, wait." Zepelli closes his eyes and makes some quick calculations, "We should rest well tonight and aim to set out at dawn. If we can reach Windknights by noon, then we can severely limit this Jack the Ripper's movements."

"You mean he'll need to stay indoors?"

"Precisely."

"Alright then," Jonathan concludes, sounding entirely too enthusiastic, "Let's meet up in front of my flat at dawn. I'll call for a carriage to take us to Windknights."

"Day breaks at seven which is approximately--"
"Ten hours."

"Yes."

Had Wang Chan done something to him? Had his blood infected him somehow?

He does not know, only that the real nightmares begin then.
In this Eden where he is Eve, the Stone Mask appears as both serpent and fruit.

"Wear me," it speaks to him. "Wear me and you shall live in opulence forever."

Was this the only way he could obtain immortality? He remembers Zeppeli describing the powers granted by the Stone Mask. In exchange for one's humanity, the artifact would drill into the wearer's brain, altering the very nerves to create a superhuman entity that subsisted on shadows and blood.

"You will be young forever," the mask promises him, "And you will bring the Kingdom of Heaven to its knees."

But what of Jonathan, he immediately thinks, where would Jonathan be in all this?

Though the mask provides no answer, he easily fills in the blanks himself. He could make it look like an accident, perhaps even convince the Ripper to place the mask on him. Jonathan would never hurt him, of that he is certain, and if he begged and pleaded, perhaps Jonathan would agree to becoming an inhabitant of the shadows as well. Of course Zeppeli and Speedwagon would disagree, perhaps they would even try to kill him! But Jonathan would always side with him, and if he were to make Jonathan wear the mask too...

"Come find me," the Stone Mask tells him, "Come and find me, Boy."

The familiarity escapes him at first and it's only when he's pulled from his dreams that he realizes: the Mask's voice is that of his mother's.

Dio wakes in the night covered in a cold sweat. Unlike prior nights, Jonathan is completely draped over him. Dio can feel the other's chest rising and falling against his arm and his soft member pressed against his side.

Perpetually tangible, he's struck with an urge to cling on and never let go.

The idea of Ripple transfer via osmosis is laughable though and he ends up untangling himself and getting up. By the time he reaches the washroom, the bout of bile has passed. As it's a quarter past five, he won't be able to go back to sleep. He washes up then, shuffling out of the washroom to pack their belongings. Though it seemed Zeppeli planned to settle the matter in one day; Dio has his doubts.

By the time Jonathan wakes, it is half past six and the sun is already skirting the horizon. Dio has already set the table and asked the landlady to call for a carriage.

"You're up early," Jonathan mumbles, sitting down while rubbing his eyes.

"Hm."

"Have you been sleeping well?" he asks, halfway through the meal.

"No worse than usual," Dio replies, allowing his forehead to be touched. "Why?"

"You were talking in your sleep," Jonathan answers, withdrawing his hand to spear another sausage.
"Oh?"

"Well, gasping really. It sounded like you were having a nightmare."

"Was I?" he wipes at the corner of his mouth, "I can't remember."

"Well, if you can't remember..." Jonathan trails off. He busies himself with the food for a couple moments before clearing his throat, "Dio, you're not angry with me, are you?"

Of course Jonathan would skirt the truth of the matter so carelessly. Dio nearly chokes on the porridge.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Well... we haven't spent much time together lately." He flushes, reaching over to twine their fingers, "We should do that after all this is over. Go for a suit-fitting or shopping for books."

"Or riding horses?"

"Yes!" He frowns then, catching the jape, "Dio, I'm being serious."

"So am I," he squeezes lightly before releasing his hold. "I would like that."

Jonathan smiles back and Dio holds his tongue. How far into the future had his cousin thought? Was he thinking of the certain reality when Dio would look twice as old as him? He is tempted to ask, but changes the subject at the last moment. As usual, he is scared to know Jonathan's answer.

Would this be the rest of their life together, he wonders hopelessly. Would he need to rob Jonathan of other options at every opportunity?

His cousin pulls him out of his frustrations and wistfulness with a light tap on the shoulder.

"Dio," he murmurs, tone serious once more, "Last night made me realize that you've never seen Jack the Ripper."

"What of it?"

"Well..." he thinks back to that February night where he had escaped death twice, "You may call me a coward for I certainly still feel the part, but when I met him, my first instinct was to run. On some level, I realized that if I fought him one hundred times, even if I remembered all of his moves and could account for them, I would still lose each time."

"Jojo -- "

"No, Dio, listen. I was proud of you last night, you've got a really good shot, you know? But I'd much rather you live than die a hero."

"Jojo," Dio rolls his eyes, "You're confusing us. When have I ever tried to be a hero?"

"Outside of last night?" Jonathan thinks about this, "You were pretty heroic at Berkeley Square."

"Only because everyone else was hysterical."

"And yet you ended up with the gravest injury."

"Which, need I remind you, was less serious than your own?"
"But you dislocated your shoulder!"

"One shoulder! Not both arms!"

"I don't believe this," Jonathan laughs, batting Dio's hand away, "Alright. I just wanted to tell you what I told Speedwagon: if Jack the Ripper really is in Windknights and it does come to a confrontation, as Mr. Zeppeli is preparing for, then -- then don't fight."

"What?"

"Don't fight," Jonathan repeats. "Just run and hide."

Dio closes his open mouth to glare.

"Dio," there's an undercurrent in Jojo's voice that he hates. "I'm scared of losing you. After Father and Danny and Erina and even Cross -- " he stares down at his shaking hands, "This newfound power is welcome, but I can't save lives with it. If you were to die because of me --"

"I could say the same thing," Dio snaps back, "Jojo, put your hero complex aside and look at the big picture. We are at the entrance to our adult lives, and here you are, gambling everything on an unwarranted confrontation with a madman."

"But it's my fault he got away!"

"So tell the police!"

"They won't listen and you know it!"

Their stand-off is terminated prematurely with a knocking on the door. The landlady calls for them, noting that the carriage had arrived and 'two strange gentlemen' were waiting outside.

"Dio," Jonathan calls, behind two flights of stairs.

Dio ignores him.

"Dio, please. Just promise me that... that you won't draw attention to yourself. I'll prioritize your safety above all else of course, but...!"

This fight is out of your league, Dio hears. Has been hearing for the past week.

"Don't confuse our roles Jojo," Dio bites back, slowing down so his cousin could catch up, "As I said: you are my responsibility and your involvement precludes mine." On the last flight of stairs he turns around to kiss him chastely, "I was the one who taught you how to eat and study and spar; do not mistake me for some damsel in distress."

Jonathan is not at all relieved and Dio does not care, so preoccupied is he with the gulf between their abilities. Even if they found Jack the Ripper and succeeded in ending him, Jonathan would still have his ridiculous Ripple ability, would still be unable to live a normal life.

"Good morning," Jonathan greets, throwing open the main entrance door.

"Morning!"

"Sleep well?"

"I certainly did," Speedwagon grins, "Dreamt of putting a stake through the Ripper's heart
"A wearer of the mask won't be killed like that," Zeppeli warns.

"Oh let me dream you geezer!"

"Well," Jonathan starts, hefting his bags into the back of the carriage while Speedwagon gave directions to the driver, "Let's head off to Windknights!"

"Wait," Zeppeli demands, when the carriage driver announces that Windknights is in-sight, "Is there any other way to reach the village?"

"You mean without going through that tunnel?"

"Yes."

"No, sorry," the coachman scratches his head, "It's surrounded by mountains and a cliff, you see."

"I see. Wait a moment please," Zeppeli strokes his moustache, considering. "Speedwagon," he asks, "How far do you think we are from the town?"

"According to the map..." Speedwagon points at the tunnel, "It should be just after the tunnel."

"Walking distance?"

"Oh, definitely."

"Alright then," he turns to Jonathan and Dio, "Get your bags. Driver, thank you for taking us this far, but we'd like to walk the rest of the way."

"Walk?" the driver is understandably perplexed. "But there's only a short way left! Lord Joestar, surely you'd like to ride the rest of the way?"

"Well, if Mr. Zeppeli insists..." Jonathan shrugs, removing his bags.

"I do."

"Then I'll follow his lead. Here," he takes out the payment, "Thank you very much for the early arrival!"

"If you're sure..." the carriage driver says, uncertainly pocketing the coinpurse. "Send a telegram over if you need a carriage back, you hear?"

"Will do, thank you!"

They remove their bags within minutes, with Speedwagon and Jonathan waving good-bye to the driver.

"What was that for?" Dio asks, checking his watch. It was half past two.

"See that tunnel?" Zeppeli asks, pointing.

"Yes."

"Notice how it curves. And how it's carved straight through a mountain. Now, if I were a madman
intent on trapping someone, that tunnel would be where I’d lay a trap.”

Speedwagon shivers.

"So... you mean that Jack the Ripper might be waiting there?"

"Yes. I think it's a certainty, even. Consider this: he sent the Chinaman to lure us here, knowing that we would arrive during the day to force him indoors. How better to take advantage of our upper hand than to block out the only entrance to the village?"

"What do you propose we do then?" Jonathan asks, shouldering his rucksack and squinting into the tunnel.

"Well." When Zeppeli smiles, there's a wicked twinkle in his eye, "As much as I would like to meet our old friend soon..." he points upwards, "I believe making an entrance is far more important."

Jonathan, Dio, and Speedwagon follow his finger, looking higher and higher still.

Speedwagon grimaces.

"Mr. Zeppeli! Surely you're not asking us to -- "

"It's either over or through," the other man shrugs, "Didn't you say you wouldn't be a burden? Why not -- ah, how did the phrase go? -- put your money on your mouth, was it?" With another sailing leap no fifty-year-old man should be capable of, he finds purchase on the mountainside.

"Jojo!" he calls, "Come up! Consider this additional training!"

"If you say so..." Jonathan says, looking back to Speedwagon and Dio and fretting. "Can you two manage? I could probably carry you over one at a time if necessary."

"Don't you dare," Dio growls right as Speedwagon replies:

"I wouldn't dream of it, Mr. Joestar!"

"That's the spirit!" Zeppeli cheers. He's already halfway up.

"This is ridiculous," Dio grumbles, beginning his own ascent.

"Just imagine!" Jonathan sighs, "If the Ripper weren't even here!" Of course he manages to make the climb look like a walk in the park.

"Jojo, don't even joke about that."

"Ah! Speedwagon!" Jonathan leaps back to catch the other man, "Are you alright? Is your hand fully healed?"

"Fine, fine." Speedwagon is quick to regain his balance, "Don't worry about me Mr. Joestar, like I said: I won't slow you down!"

"So," Speedwagon huffs and puffs when Jonathan pulls him to the summit, "This... this is Windknights, huh?"

"Are such villages common in this country?" Zeppeli asks. He's perched on an outcropping of
rocks, having pulled another sandwich and pepper shaker from thin air.

"Common enough," the other man gasps, "though... though the geography surrounding Windknights is unique."

"I see." He takes a bite of his sandwich, savoring, before taking note of Jonathan and Dio. If he's surprised that Dio was the second to reach the peak, he doesn't show it. Of course this was because Jonathan stayed behind to help Speedwagon who had reluctantly confessed to a fear of vertical heights. He takes another bite of his sandwich before breaking it in half. He breaks the halves into quarters, giving one of each of the cousins.

"Hey!" Speedwagon protests, "Where's my share?"

"Didn't you say you wouldn't hold us back?" Zeppeli scorns, "Then why couldn't you climb the mountain yourself?"

"That's...!"

"It's alright, Speedwagon, you can have my share," Jonathan gives his sandwich over, laughing good-naturedly when his friend predictably tears up.

"Jojo," Zeppeli frowns.

"It's no good fighting on an empty stomach now is it?" Jonathan smiles.

"Idiot," Dio mutters, breaking his own portion in half and shoving the eighth in Jonathan's direction, "You're the one who'll be expending the most energy."

"But Dio, this is yours!"

"Just eat it."

"Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon begins after they've finished their snack, "You have my thanks for helping me up the mountain but the old man is right: I came here to avenge my friends so I'll have to carry my own weight."

"But Speedwagon --"

"No Mr. Joestar. Look at your cousin, he manages somehow!"

"This is nothing," Dio grunts. While it had taken him a while to catch his breath, this was still just a climb up a mountain.

"Observe," Zeppeli instructs, gesturing to the village below, "If you were a man like the Ripper, where would you make your residence?"

"Outside of the obvious, you mean?" Speedwagon asks.

"The castle...?" Jonathan says at the same time.

"Precisely." He takes out the salt shaker and sprinkles some into the air, watching the granules blow towards the castle.

"Now, Jojo, put your training to use. I want you to move from here," he taps his foot against the pile of rocks, "To there. Without touching the ground."
"Without touching the ground?!!" Speedwagon echoes, outraged. "You can't be serious!"

Indeed, the distance between the two points was at least two kilometers.

"Jojo?" Zeppeli prompts, "What about you? Do you feel the same?"

Jonathan furrows his brows, walking over to where Zeppeli stood and looking to the castle.

"Mr. Joestar, you'll break your neck!"

"Quiet Speedwagon," Zeppeli commands. "Look! He's thinking."

Dio, fearing the worst, heaves his rucksack up and begins climbing down the other side of the mountain.

"Mr. Brando, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" he retorts, letting go to drop two meters. "I'm getting a head start."

"Wait," Jonathan calls, "I'm almost done!" He rubs his chin, re-examining the vast distance, and turns back to Zeppeli. "Mr. Zeppeli, do you mean for only me to cross this distance?"

His question surprises Zeppeli at least, for the Italian raises his eyebrows.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, could I bring those two with me?"

The older man bursts into laughter.

"If you think you're capable of it, by all means!"

"Mr. Joestar! How do you plan to carry the two of us across that distance?!!"

"Oh, I don't plan to," Jonathan grins as Dio leaps back up, interest piqued. He re-arrives at the summit just in time to see his cousin drop to a crouch, pressing his palms to the ground.

There's a wave of energy both Dio and Speedwagon can feel and then, from underneath Jonathan's fingertips, a sapling sprouts and sprouts and sprouts.

"Incredible!" Speedwagon cheers.

"A fully-grown tree, not bad," Zeppeli claps, admiring the sudden spread of shade, "But Jojo, what do you plan to do with it?"

Rather than reply, Jonathan closes his eyes in concentration. With both hands pressed against the tree trunk, he gives a great shout:

"Life Magnetism Overdrive!"

The bellow is followed by a scattering of tree leaves, which flitter and flutter without touching the ground, aligning and arranging themselves into the shape of an enormous leaf.

"Hold on tight!" Jonathan warns, grabbing onto the two non-Ripple users and jumping off the cliff. Dio bites his tongue to keep from screaming.
"This is amazing!" Speedwagon shouts at the top of his lung when they land on the enormous leaf. "Can you steer it?"

"Not really!" Jonathan admits, "But the wind is blowing us in the right direction!"

"Very good," Zeppeli praises, landing on the castle palisade with a leaf glider of his own, "Jojo, I see now that you've got a good head on your shoulders, in addition to a good heart! More than making use of what you've got, the Ripple allows you to create what you don't have!"

"That was amazing," Speedwagon repeats, still breathless, "How did you think up something like that, Mr. Joestar?!"

"Well..." Jonathan scratches at his cheek, "I remember Dio falling off a Roman settlement in our schooldays. The only reason I was able to catch him was because he fell at a slant."

"Is that so," Zeppeli muses, twirling the edge of his moustache. "Well, we've arrived at the castle gentlemen. Stay close! I'll lead the way -- Jojo, you take the back. Try to stay as much in the sunlight as possible." He squints at the clearly-setting sun, "Though it's likely we'll have a nighttime confrontation at this rate."

"Wouldn't it be better to wait for tomorrow?" Speedwagon asks.

"No," Zeppeli shakes his head, jumping down to force open a side door, "We'll be sitting ducks for the whole night if we aren't the first to strike."

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"I've said it once and I'll say it again," Speedwagon whispers after they've been circling the castle for an hour, "This place has a foul smell."

It did indeed, and it was the same smell Jonathan had nearly puked from back in Whitechapel. The difference between the castle at Windknights and the underground lot on Ogre Street was that the smell seemed to be coming from everywhere.

He takes a torch from the walls, pulling a pack of matches from his rucksack to light it. Dio and Speedwagon do the same.

"Light is no good in a real fight," Zeppeli warns. He's nicked a bottle of wine from the cellars (or had he been carrying it with him the whole time?) and has also obtained a wineglass somewhere along the way. How he managed to uncork the bottle without an opener is anyone's guess, but he pours a bit more then, sipping casually.

"Oy, old man," Speedwagon grumbles, "Are you going to finish that bottle before we meet the Ripper?"

"One bottle is not enough to inebriate me," Zeppeli scoffs. "Besides, when night falls, I expect this wineglass and bottle will save your life."

Jonathan and Speedwagon trade confused glances. Dio chalks it up as a figure of speech.

"Do you think we're going in circles?" Jonathan asks, after they've gone up and down a grand staircase three times.

"Certainly. But my bones tell me that this will be the spot for our final confrontation with Stone Mask. Are you paying attention, Jojo? Notice the absence of sunlight and life -- we must use these
conditions to our advantages."

"I see." Jonathan casts his gaze from room to room.

The castle at Windknights, Dio notes, stands in contrast to the supposedly haunted house in Berkeley Square. Whereas everything in the house had been covered in a fine layer of dust -- here, there were footsteps and fingerprints everywhere. The house had had a musky scent as well, cobwebs and mothballs and the like; here, the smell of rotting carcass permeates. More than that, the blood has no obvious source. Someone is living here, every detail still seems to say, someone has made their home in this place of stone and silence.

At some point, Jonathan bends down to shine his torch on the floor.

"What is it?" Dio asks, going over.

"It's nothing," Jonathan replies, straightening up. "I thought there was blood on the floor but it was just water."

"Don't lag behind!" Zeppeli calls.

Soon enough, the sun has fully set.

"Be on your guard," the leader of the expedition warns, thrusting his half-full wineglass forward, "The real danger starts now."

"Hey, Zeppeli," Speedwagon asks, "What is that wineglass for? And -- hey! Where did the wine bottle go?"

"I finished it and set it to the side," Zeppeli shrugs, "And as for this wineglass... have you heard of a saying like this? Vikings were made by the north wind."

"In challenges," Dio recites, "Opportunities arise."

"Very good," Zeppeli compliments, "I see we have a poet in our midst."

"But what does that have to do with the wineglass?" Speedwagon persists.

"Oh," Jonathan understands, finally catching up to them, "The Ripple -- the wine is creating it."

"Just so, Jojo," Zeppeli smiles, "It would take too much energy to make a tree grow from stone, but a little cup of a wine like this? I don't even need to concentrate!"

The four of them walk for some time more. After the sun has fully set and the stars have come out. The waxing moon is not even half full.

"This is it," Zeppeli says, after they've passed the staircase for the seventh time. He gives the wineglass to Speedwagon (who observes the wine practically spiking out of the glass) before hurrying up the stairs.

"So," an eerily booming voice greets, "You've been here all along."

"Ripper!" Speedwagon shouts.

"That's him?" Dio asks.

"Yes," Jonathan shudders, "But he's changed too. He used to have burn marks, but now..."
"I must say," the Ripper continues, easily dodging Zeppeli's punch, "It was quite clever of you insects to bypass the tunnel. I had even gone to welcome you there, but now I'm just disappointed."

"Jack the Ripper, is it?" Zeppeli asks, leaping back to stand on a banister, "I've never met you personally, but I speak now to the mask that's taken hold of your brain: we meet again!"

The Ripper laughs madly, stabbing his own arm, before twisting his head a hundred and eighty degrees with a sickening crack of bone to reveal the Stone Mask.

"Zeppeli was it?" the Mask intones. How it manages to speak without moving is anyone's guess. "My, how you've grown. Would you like to wear me? You know what they say -- like father, like son!"

"Bastard...!" Zeppeli clenches his fist, calling forth a burst of Ripple.

"Mr. Zeppeli!" Jonathan shouts, coming to his teacher's aid. The mask swivels the Ripper's head again, just in time to dodge a pair of punches.

"And you," Jack rasps, "The little nobleman scholar."

A flurry of kicks and punches are exchanged then, and the Ripper is clearly at a disadvantage. He takes one point-blank hit from Jonathan and is sent tumbling down the stairs.

"How dare you!" he spits, ejecting daggers from his arms and forcing Dio and Speedwagon to dodge to the side, "How dare you!"

"It doesn't seem he knows about the Ripple," Zeppeli notes.

"Good."

"I had planned to kill you here but -- " the madman bares his fangs, snarling, "It seems my friend has other plans." He rolls twice, covering the floor with blood, before leaping into one of the holes in the wall. A newly-installed dumbwaiter by the looks of it.

"What are you waiting for?" he taunts from the lower chambers, "We all die in the end!"

"Wait," Zeppeli calls, right before Jonathan is about to dive after the Ripper, "We'll be walking into a trap if we just follow him."

"So what do we do?"

"What did you think I was doing while we were walking in circles? We use another entrance -- come, follow me!"

Their descent into the castle dungeons is marked by hurried footsteps and, at the end, the crash of a wineglass.

"Mr. Zeppeli!" Jonathan calls, "Are you alright?!"

"Perfectly fine Jojo," his mentor dusts off his hands, "Raring to fight, even!"

"Oh God," Speedwagon moans, pointing to path ahead, "That's where the smell came from."

Littered across the lower levels were human remains. All of them in pieces and all of them rotting, but most of them were unmistakably fresh.
"Dio," Jojo tries, "Don't look!"

How Dio longs to kiss the other man and tell him of the state of the bodies found floating in the Thames! He laughs quietly instead, averting his gaze, and they continue onwards.

"He's pure evil," Speedwagon mutters, gingerly stepping over a pile of fingers, "Even back in Ogre Street, the Ripper took joy in murder."

"That's why we're here," Jonathan emphasizes, "We need to put a stop to him."

"In here," Zeppeli says, gesturing to a candlelit room. "And be careful!"

As soon as he steps into it, his warning is cut off by his own strangled scream. There's the cranking of chains and the sound of the door being slammed shut and bolted.

"Old man...!"

"Mr. Zeppeli, what happened?!"

Impotently, Jonathan and Speedwagon beat their fists against the locked door.

"Zeppeli, is it?" Jack the Ripper asks, stepping out of the shadows to observe his first victim. "It has been a long time. I suppose the honor is mine tonight."

With a gleeful laugh, he pulls on the end of the chain, forcing the other man higher and higher.

"Mr. Zeppeli!" With a roar, Jonathan throws himself against the door. "Mr. Zeppeli, just -- just wait! We'll come save you!"

"What pretty words," the Ripper cackles, "I think you'd like a show!" He lowers Zeppeli slightly, allowing his feet to skirt the ground, before yanking the chain with even more force. The Italian gives a choked warble, nails drawing blood from his own throat.

"Speedwagon -- you're next."

"Jojo," Dio stops his cousin, "The door won't budge, stop that!"

"But what am I supposed to do?!"

"There's a hole over here!" Speedwagon calls. "But it's far too small to fit into!"

"Mr. Zeppeli!" Jonathan screams, eyes glued to his mentor's torture, "Mr. Zeppeli!!"

"Scream all you like," his torturer jeers, "It's all music to me!" To demonstrate, he lowers the chain again.

"Jojo -- " Zeppeli chokes out, "Jojo, do not panic! Think! Even if you cannot save me, you must -- "

"No, no," the Ripper chides, "You are an exhibit -- artworks are to be seen, not heard!"

"No, Mr. Zeppeli," Jonathan is crying now, "No, I will save you." He takes a deep breath, trying to block out his mentor's anguish, and takes a couple steps back. Dio tenses, ready to stop the other man from launching himself a second time, but Jonathan turns instead to Speedwagon.

"Speedwagon! Where is the hole?"
"Right here!" he points to the shoulder-high aperture, "But Mr. Joestar, you'll never fit through it!"

"I don't plan to." Jonathan raises his voice, hollering, "Mr. Zeppeli, just hang on!" before gathering a vortex of Ripple in his fist.

The light is so blinding --

("It's as if I were looking at the sun!" Speedwagon recounts.)

-- Dio has to shield his eyes. He refuses to avert his gaze though, for Jonathan is so dazzling and glorious and whole in that moment.

"My heart resonates!" Jonathan calls out, wiping the tears from his face, "The heat is enough to burn! Engraved in the beat of my heart -- *Sunlight Yellow Overdrive*!"

Like every genius, he ends up underestimating his own abilities: the flood of Ripple energy not only encases the room in a fiery glow, but it spills over into the very wall, creating a massive breach in more than large enough to walk through.

"Mr. Zeppeli!" he calls, dashing into the room.

"Jojo -- Jack...!" the old man gasps, pointing at the serial killer.

Jonathan ignores his mentor then, kneeling beside him and openly crying.

"Jojo, you fool -- !" Zeppeli is struggling to breathe, even as his body is encased in a yellow glow, "Chase after him, you idiot! Here, I -- you -- the rest of my life force -- "

"No, Mr. Zeppeli," Jonathan shakes his head, pressing the older man's hand to his chest. It is in the heartwrenching moment that Jack the Ripper escapes, nearly knocking Dio and Speedwagon to the ground in his retreat.

"Hey! Hey -- the Ripper!"

"Jojo!" Dio shouts, scrambling over to his cousin, "Jojo, what are you doing?!!"

"Mr. Zeppeli, you have a son. You have a family," Jonathan says, not even registering Dio's words, "You need to live."

"But Jojo," he whispers, "You are the lion of the prophecy."

At the same time, both teacher and student yell out: "Supreme Pass Overdrive!" and there's a second flash of light which, upon fading, causes Jonathan to pass out.

"Jojo!" Dio runs forward, catching his cousin.

"Mannaggia!" Zeppeli curses, squeezing at the already-healed scratches on his neck, "Your cousin is an absolute idiot!"

Upon confirming that Jonathan had only passed out and was breathing normally, Dio sets his bag down.

"Believe me, I know," he grumbles, shouldering the stupid man he fell in love with.
"Wait, wait, wait," Speedwagon sounds, fingers twitching, "You mean to say that you -- " he points at Zeppeli, "Were prepared to give the rest of your life force to Mr. Joestar?!!"

"It was in the prophecy!" Zeppeli retorts, looking far too irritated for someone brought back from the brink of death, "I was supposed to die in a flame-filled room while pursuing the Stone Mask in order to unleash a golden lion upon the world!"

"So, then," Speedwagon ignores the slew of metaphors, "Why couldn't you?"

"Because that idiot," Zeppeli stops to shoot a glare at his still-unconscious pupil whose head is pillowed in Dio's lap, "Was thinking the same thing! And now I'm the one with both of our powers!"

"What?!"

Zeppeli walks over to Jonathan, pressing two fingers to his pulse and curses.

"Your cousin is an idiot," he says again, "An idiot! He's got barely any Ripple left! It'll be a wonder if he can even stand, much less fight!"

Dio pinches his cousin's nose.

"Jojo, stop pretending."

"But I was doing so well too," Jonathan sighs, sitting up.

"I was fated to die back there!" Zeppeli screams, shaking his shoulders, "You were supposed to become the lion!"

"But you weren't dying," Jonathan argues, "And how could I let you die? You've already given enough of your life in pursuit of the mask. When this is over, go home and talk to your son. He may be grown, but I'm sure he misses you."

"But Mr. Joestar...!" Speedwagon tears up, "What about your Ripple?"

"I guess we're all dead weight now," he grins.

Zeppeli boxes his ears.

"Ow!"

"You may have given away most of your Ripple, but I'll be damned if you don't see this through to the end," he growls. "Come, Jojo -- and Brando and Speedwagon too!"

"Let's go catch ourselves a Ripper!" Speedwagon cheers.

Zeppeli alone could have fought the Ripper to a draw. Zeppeli imbued with Jonathan's Ripple energy makes the stand-off a joke. They climb the stairs of the tower only to find Jack the Ripper crouched pathetically in the corner of the balcony, clutching at his still-bleeding wounds.

"Heal!" he screams, sinking his fingers into a puddle of blood, "Why won't you heal?!"

"I see the lion has sunk his claws into you," Zeppeli notes, "But it will be my honor to deliver the finishing blow."
"You Italian fool," the Ripper snarls in an alien voice, standing up and twisting his head again, "I have no need for this useless body any more!"

Before Zeppeli's overdrive connects, causing him to crumble to dust, Jack the Ripper slashes at his own throat, covering the Stone Mask in blood. As the mask flies off, Wang Chan appears from the shadows.

"The mask -- !"

"No!"

"Stop right there, Wang Chan!"

Whether it is the night wind or dumb luck or something inexplicable like 'fate', the Stone Mask ends up falling into Dio Brando's hands.

Out of desperation, the artifact shows him another dream, this one even more striking than the first. He is a radiant immortal, the crown of creation, the being that would create a new future. Robed in shadowed riches, he rules the whole world with an iron fist, sitting atop the normal pitifully flawed humans. The kings and queens, nothing more than a nighttime snack, are puppets made to dance on his strings and God himself has been dragged from his kingdom. And Jonathan? What of Jonathan? He is by Dio's side of course. Beautiful and eternal as well.

Dio forces his eyes from the dreamscape to look at the other man. For every time he closes his eyes, he can still him encased in that almost-holy cocoon of light.

Sunlight Yellow Overdrive... it was a fitting name for Jonathan's final Ripple. Because Jonathan, at the end of it, was a creature of the sun. To condemn him to the shadows for eternity would be a fate worse than death. And even though he, Dio, still desired wealth and power, immortality is worthless without his other half. Jonathan would never choose to live in darkness and he could not force him into this fate. For Dio has already known, has always known: wherever his cousin goes, he too will follow.

"Jojo!" he screams, throwing the mask into the air.

Wang Chan almost cuts his throat. Almost. But Jonathan turns him to ashes with a touch, and despite being at the end of his rope, still manages to tackle Dio to the floor.

Zeppeli and Speedwagon smash the relic to pieces while Dio listens to Jonathan cry anew.

"It's over," he sighs from his place on the floor, reaching up to stroke his cousin's hair, "It's over."

Far too tired to scale the mountain a second time, they crawl and hobble their way out of the castle and into the village.

"The earliest carriage you can get us for London," Speedwagon gasps as soon as the post office opens its doors.

"It'll be half a day at the earliest, sir."

"We'll take it!"

They then collapse in a pile of blood and sweat, with Jonathan and Speedwagon shamelessly
snoring by the front door. By the time the carriage arrives, it is the afternoon of the seventh and they are all rested and refreshed.

"I can't believe it," Zeppeli says, plucking at his moustache, "I'll be able to see my son again! Oh, I'm sure he hates me. And his mother too! I've been away from home for years..."

"Don't worry about the details," Jonathan urges, squeezing his hand, "Just leave on the first ship."

"Thank you," Speedwagon adds, bowing his head, "It's because of your efforts that my friends can be laid to rest."

"And all of the other victims too."

"I can't believe it either," Jonathan echoes, pinching himself, "It's over! And -- oh God! There's still Wilcox's wedding to attend! And I've been asked to lecture again, and -- and -- !"

"I can't believe you, Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon reiterates, "To just give away your Ripple like that!"

"Oh," Jonathan shrugs, grinning, "Well as soon as Mr. Zeppeli told me it was possible, I had planned to do away with it at the end of this."

"What! Why?!"

Dio raises an eyebrow, surprised as well.

"Hmmm..." Jonathan taps his chin considering, "I guess I won't have a use for it in the day-to-day? Plus, if I end up being a professor and still look like this, I'm sure my students would be terrified!"

The rest of the carriage ride is spent swapping incredible and fantastic stories and making promises to meet again.

-  

"You know," Jonathan grins, sidling up to him when they're back in the Fitzroy flat, in bed, "I didn't want to say this while we were still fighting him, but do you remember that weird noise Jack the Ripper was making?"

Dio narrows his eyes, instantly suspicious.

"Yes." A pause. "Why?"

"Because -- " Jonathan devolves into giggles, head bobbing against Dio's shoulder, "It sounded exactly like your animal's cry!" And then, when Dio doesn't get it, he adds, "In the word game we played at Chichester, remember?" As Dio does not immediately remember, he mimics the sound, breaking off halfway to laugh even harder.

Determined to stand above it all, Dio soundly punches him in the shoulder.

"Hey!" Jonathan whines, rubbing at the spot, "Is that any way to treat your savior!"

"Jojo," Dio barks without bite, kissing him anyway, "Shut up."
And I, I love to spend my time in singing

In the handful of months when he had slept alone (days which seemed to stretch indefinitely and which he feared would never end but which lasted, in the grand scheme of things, less than half a year and ended as well as they could), this is what Dio will miss the most. Sweaty tangled limbs and easy conversation, a chaste kiss or soft caress in moments of silence, and two of them drifting to sleep under the same sheets. It's not all idyll unfortunately, especially as Jonathan will not stop laughing, no matter how aroused, and he has learned a trick with his tongue that has Dio seeing stars.

"I was surprised." The comment slips off his tongue when they're curled up together.

"Surprised?"

"That you would give that ability away."

"Oh, well, it's useful enough when fighting against the undead, but," Jonathan shrugs, "I don't think I'll be encountering them regularly. Mr. Zeppeli has given up enough chasing after the mask, I couldn't take his life on top of that."

"So you have none left?"

"Hm? Oh, well, a little." Jonathan turns to face him, pulling his arm from out underneath Dio's, and presses his palm against Dio's bare chest.

"What are you..." Dio is cut off when a warmness fills him, spreading from Jonathan's fingertips into his chest, and then flowing out from there.

"There," Jonathan says, pulling his hand back and kissing his collarbone.

"...What did you do?" There's a tingling sensation, not at all unpleasant, but certainly unusual.

"I gave you half of the Ripple I had left. It's not much and I don't know if you'll able to use it."

"Then...?"

"Well it's what I was planning," Jonathan fails to explain. "After we beat Jack the Ripper."

"What?"

"To give you half of the Ripple."

"I can't use this."

"I know." Jonathan shrugs again, "But what's mine is yours."

His cousin, Dio realizes, had been worried in his own way. He chuckles, pinching Jonathan's cheek, and they break into laughter, tumbling and rolling until Dio's left arm and leg are dangling off the edge. Jonathan pulls him back with a yelp and Dio drags the sheets in his wake.

"Should I...?"

"No, it's fine," Dio shakes his head, before resting his chin on Jonathan's shoulder. It's extraordinary how quickly one can adapt. Though he is still more likely than Jonathan to demand
physical affection, the disparity is not so great.

Jonathan heaves a sigh, stroking at sweaty blond hair.

- 

The morning of the eighth, a day before Wilcox's wedding, Dio seizes upon (what he had thought then to be) the first piece of the puzzle.

"Jojo," he says over breakfast, "Make me a promise."

"For what?" Jonathan asks, voice understandably muffled by the food. He chews and swallows, sips water, and then clears his throat. "What sort of promise?"

"I don't know," Dio lies.

"Well if you don't know, how can I make a promise?"

"A promise of a promise if you will. I'll trade you one for it."

"A promise of a promise?" Jonathan echoes, furrowing his brows.

"A pledge of sorts then."

"Alright," Jonathan acquiesces, no doubt feeling a similar need to please. "So, it is -- "

"I shall ask something of you, once, and you shall do everything in your power to make it true. I will pledge to do the same for one of your requests, of course."

"A wish, then."

"No," Dio is adamant here, "Not a wish. A promise. The request must be within our power to grant."

"Oh Dio," Jonathan teases, "Sometimes I forget you're a lawyer."

"Yes well," he kisses him, off to work, "I don't think anyone could forget you and your archaeology."

His plan is thus: at the wedding, he will have Jonathan dance with a woman. Since Kensington will be there, it will merely be a matter of choosing a fitting one. A lower-ranking woman would be best, Dio has concluded, the second daughter of a Baron -- someone who would be amenable to... well, less than normal living arrangements for husband and wife. The promise then, well, he would use it to have Jonathan marry the girl. Then his cousin would have a wife and, in due time, an heir. This is the best gift he can give Jonathan for his twenty-first birthday. His cousin might throw a fit, perhaps he would even refuse the first offer, but he would surely see the light in time.

"Brando!" one of his coworkers greets and they shake hands, "Are you back already? How was the coast?"

"Pleasant enough. Is that the new paperwork?"

"Oh, that's just the first batch! The head wants a word with you, speaking of which..."
Like everything done by the Wilcox family, the wedding of their heir is a spectacular event. Of course his fiancée's status as the sole daughter to an equally immense shipping magnate must have helped things greatly. A chunk of central London is cordoned off while the main festivities take place on a grand cruiser they somehow managed to float onto the River Thames. Everyone who was anyone had been invited and rumors said the Wilcoxes had spent more money on the affair than the Queen herself had spent on her favorite daughter!

"Christ," Pyrce exclaims as their little group is looking over the ship's port after the vows have been exchanged, "I don't think I've ever seen the waters so clean."

"It's likely they had to reroute some of the sewers," Speedwagon guesses.

"I think I can see the bottom of the river!" Jonathan declares, leaning dangerously over the railing.

"Don't do that," Dio snaps, pulling him back, "Do you want to fall in?"

"This is probably the only chance we'll ever get to swim in the river and live to tell the tale," Pyrce sighs. Then he looks woefully at the dancing couples, "Oh man, Jane is going to be furious I didn't invite her..."

"Where is Miss Murray speaking of which?" Jonathan asks, plucking another flute of champagne from the waiter. "Did she not get our invitation?"

"On a dig I think," Pyrce makes a face, "I have no idea how anyone can enjoy those things."

"How did you get an invitation?" Dio asks, nodding at Speedwagon.

"I sent him one, obviously," Jonathan answers. "I would have sent one to Mr. Zeppeli but -- "

"He's already returned to Italy," Speedwagon dramatically sniffs.

"Mr. Zeppeli?" Pyrce raises both eyebrows, "Who's he?"

"Oh, the Italian man Miss Murray told us to look out for."

"The what?"

"It's a long story," Dio dismisses.

"Joestar! Brando!" Webb calls from the other side. His second fiancée is hanging onto his arm as he waves in their direction.

"Webb! That was a marvelous speech!" Jonathan congratulates, clapping the other man on the back.

"Thanks! Say, sweetheart," he kisses the woman's cheek, "Would you mind talking with the gentlemen here for a bit? There's something I need to discuss with Joestar here."

Dio raises an eyebrow only for Jonathan to shoot him a curiously conciliatory look.

"Of course darling," she sighs, releasing his arm and helping herself to the champagne.

As conversation naturally turns to the best man's upcoming nuptials, Dio watches Jonathan walk off with Webb. Most surprising of all then, is how Wilcox leaves the center of the festivities on the pretense of allowing his bride a dance or two with her relatives. Though he shakes hands and kisses wrists, he easily parts the crowd, making his way to the other two.
It's impossible to hear what they're saying, but they're definitely talking. It starts off pleasant enough but escalates quickly until Jonathan is pulling Webb and Wilcox apart.

Dio gives a quick 'excuse me' before stalking over to his cousin.

"-- promised we would help them!"

"I don't see you doing anything!"

"Well I'm not the one he's asking for!"

"So we're just going to put him on the cutting block?"

"He agreed to it!"

"What's going on?" Dio interrupts, as the best man's fists are still clenched about the groom's lapels.

"Dio!" Jonathan exclaims, practically toppling over the opposite railing. His face is bright red, a detail which both Webb and Wilcox take notice of. Webb takes his hands off and trades a sly smile with Wilcox.

"Oh," Wilcox leers.

"Oh indeed," Webb adds.

"I suppose congratulations are in order?"

"You know what they say, the fruit doesn't --"

"Darling, where have you been?" Webb's fiancée click-clacks over.

"Stop it," Jonathan sighs, scrubbing the flush from his cheeks. "Wilcox, congratulations again. Webb, leave this to me. It's my fault and you're right, I am the one he's asking for. Dio," he grabs his cousin by the arm, steering him back towards their table, "Let's go."

"Do you expect me," Dio asks, though he allows himself to be dragged, "To ignore that scene?"

"I'll explain later," Jonathan rubs at his temples, "Do you remember how Father had a representative in the Indian National Congress?"

"Yes." Vaguely, he could recall something like this.

"Well, Wilcox has one too. And apparently --"

"Joestar, look at the smokestacks over there," Pyrce calls.

"Are you alright?" Jonathan asks, turning to Speedwagon.

"Perfectly fine!" the older man insists, dabbing at his brow, "I just -- well, these sort of functions -- oh! But I'm grateful for your invitation Mr. Joestar, really!"

"And I'm grateful to your help," Jonathan replies. On the other table, he sees Dio leave with Kensington and relaxes considerably. Then he turns back to his friend, "I feel the same, you know? I never know what to do with myself at these things."
"Joestar," Pyrce sighs, clapping his shoulder, "You are a man. Therefore, you ask the ladies to dance. Here, allow me."

Jonathan and Speedwagon watch on as Pyrce charms his way into a circle of old ladies.

"Ah, Speedwagon. Could you... please excuse me for a bit?" Jonathan says after a break in the conversation.

"Oh, no," Speedwagon scrambles, thinking the other man wished to use the restroom, "By all means, Mr. Joestar."

"Will you be alright by yourself?"

"Of course!"

Jonathan gives a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes before hurrying off.

- 

"The daughter of a baron?" Kensington clarifies.

"Yes," Dio nods, "After some thought, I have decided that would be the best match."

"If you say so..." Kensington scans the throng of guests, looking for an appropriately ranked woman. "Oh,” he says instead, seizing Dio's shoulders and swiveling him to face the ballroom floor, "Looks like your cousin can manage fine by himself."

It is a good thing Kensington has a light hold on him, Dio thinks. He wouldn't have fainted, not that, but he might very well have started a scene. Because there amidst the other couples, whirling and twirling like he was twelve years old again, was Jonathan Joestar himself.

Dio exhales, forcing himself to relax.

"Who is that?" he asks. If Kensington notices the strain in his tone, he knows better than to comment on it.

"Man oh man," their rugby captain whistles, shaking his head, "Your cousin knows how to pick them."

"Who is she?" Despite his scanning of the scrapbook and the copious social gatherings he'd attended over the years, Dio does not recognize the woman at all. But her hair -- that damnably golden hair -- along with her hand in Jonathan's and the skip in their step...

"Constance Donagan." The name alone is enough for Dio to twist his gaze away from his cousin.

"What?"

"She's been in a convent for as long as I know. Her father must've brought her back. What with her brother's disappearance and all."

The context of Webb and Wilcox's conversation makes everything fall neatly into place.

"She's the daughter of an Earl," Kensington continues, "And from what I've heard, literate. But not engaged. Not yet at least."
"We've never met her," Webb admits, after Dio has wrung the truth out of his old classmates.

"The thing is," Wilcox grimaces, "Donagan's mum died giving birth to him."

"So she's his half-sister?"

"Mm. And on top of that, her mother died giving birth to her, which was why she was sent to live in the convent."

"I doubt Donagan even remembers her," Webb muses.

"He certainly never talked about her!"

"Well I know she was called back when we were all presumed dead. You know," Webb jibes, "like when your uncle was poised to inherit?"

"And when your sister's husband was about to be adopted?" Wilcox shoots back.

"And why," Dio interjects, "Is she dancing with my cousin?"

Despite being grown men and decked out in their Sunday finest, Webb and Wilcox nearly fall to the floor with laughter. Dio scowls, crosses his eyes, and waits.

"Sorry Brando."

"Yeah, sorry."

"It's just -- right then -- " they trade amused glances, "You looked just like Donagan!"

"The very definition of a sourpuss."

"How cross he was upon learning Cross was to be taken!"

They trade handshakes and laugh some more. With effort, Dio refrains from looking at the dancers. Jonathan and the blond-haired wench had already shared three dances. Though his cousin did not look happy, and the girl likewise, they were still clearly dancing. He catches his fingers twitching and stills them, cursing how he had to kill off Wang Chan.

"Sorry Brando," Wilcox repeats, smacking his chest and taking a couple gulps of air, "I'm fine now. Anyways -- "

"We don't know the official reason -- "

"Something about the Indian National Congress," Dio mutters.

"Yes, something to that extent. But the real reason is simple: money." Wilcox looks at Webb then, "As his daughter cannot inherit, the Earl plans to do what Webb's parents planned to do: adopt their daughter's husband and have him inherit."

Dio is... well, he's struck speechless at the absurdity of the situation.

"But in addition," Webb continues, "Lord Donagan wants control over Cross' properties."

"But if he's Cross' uncle -- "

"No, no. Cross and Donagan's mothers are cousins."
"I... see."

"Relax Brando," Webb chides, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"They make a handsome couple, don't they?" Wilcox adds.

Are they testing him, he wonders? He manages to dredge up a smile, replying: "Yes. Yes they do."

As soon as they're in the carriage bound for the Fitzroy Flat, Jonathan tries to excuse himself.

"I meant to tell you sooner."

And then, when Dio says nothing: "See, it was the representative for the Indian National Congress. The man Father recommended maintained his seat, which was why the vote for lower tariffs was passed. But it was only passed because Donagan had failed to negotiate a route through Mandvi, which meant Bombay..." he trails off and swallows. The clatter of hoofs and wheels over cobblestones fills the silence.

"Dio. What it means is that the first profit I made -- I made through the death of a friend."

Dio turns his head, looking out the window. The garden square is in sights at least.

"I was prepared to plead guilty in the lawsuit," Jonathan admits. Because of course there had been a lawsuit that his cousin had somehow kept hidden. "But then the Earl -- that is, Donagan's father -- he learned that I was unmarried and unengaged. So he -- "

Jonathan is shut up momentarily as the carriage pulls to a stop. Dio sidesteps the proffered stool while Jonathan scrambles to pay the fare. And then they're dashing up the six flights of stairs, with Jonathan insistently continuing:

"He explained the situation to me. That he had lost two wives in childbirth and didn't want to lose a third. That his only son was dead and that Cross was the closest thing to a secondary heir he had. Dio, surely you must understand! Haven't you seen court cases like this?"

Indeed, even in the case of not-of-age male heirs, the widow rarely ended up being the primary overseer of the estate -- to say nothing of a daughter who had been bound to a convent!

He says nothing however, merely unlocking the door to their flat.

"It's... it's a way to make amends."

Some of his disgust must make its way from his chest to his face for Jonathan looks at him and laughs a bitter laugh.

"You might have been right the first time," Dio hears his idealist of a cousin say, "About love and affection outside of your class." Jonathan blinks back tears while leaning against the parlor wall. He takes a deep breath before admitting: "The Earl told me about my parents. How -- how they met under similar circumstances. It was my mother's money that provided Father with the capital he needed to re-establish a route from Gibraltar to..." he stops himself, looking ill, and collapses into the sofa.

Dio should be offering condolences.

"He must have learned to love her," Jonathan insists, "For he never remarried and always spoke so
highly of her."

"Do you plan to do the same?" Dio asks, finally finding his voice, "Learn to love her?"

"How could I?" Jonathan asks, pressing an arm over his face. "I love you."

He should be reassured. He should reciprocate the sentiment. He should kiss him. But in that moment, all he can see is Jonathan at the altar with that wretched woman and himself in the spot of the best man.

Dio storms into his room and locks the door, stripping out of the three-piece suit and throwing himself onto the bed.

That he manages any respite in sleep is wonder enough.
Some joyous song, some joyous song

They go to church on the morning of the tenth, avoiding last night's discourse as if it were an elephant in the room.

But like the lid of a boiling pot, the silence stews and stews until the bubbles spill over the edges. Jonathan starts anew the second they are back in the flat, restocking the ice box and pantry.

"Dio, you must understand -- "

"When were you planning on telling me?" Dio snaps, "Because I suspect this discussion has taken place over the last couple weeks."

Jonathan opens and then closes his mouth.

"Would it be in the wedding invitation? When you were at the altar? Did you plan to tell me while her furniture would be arriving at the manor?"

"I did not know the Earl and his daughter were attending Wilcox's wedding."

"Liar."

Whether Jonathan flinches from the insult or the tone, Dio does not know. Fate itself seems to be stringing him along, gifting him with four months of happiness only to --

"I wanted... to speak to her. About us, I mean." Jonathan sees his cousin's scowl but presses forward nonetheless, "I know it's seen as immoral -- "

"Illegal, you mean."

Jonathan flinches a second time but still, he says, "Yes. That. But it's as you said. We love each other. I care for you too, more than any other. Surely she would understand."

Having heard enough, Dio turns heel to head back to his own room. He needs to take action before Jonathan does.

"Dio? Dio, what are you doing?"

He settles for a favorite ensemble: a cape with feathered epaulettes, a blood-red reverse, and gold trim. The vest is a solid color at least, though it's offset with the dyed cravat. He checks his reflection in the mirror, readjusting his cufflinks before combing back his hair.

"What you doing, changing? Where are you going?"

Dio steps out of his room to kiss the edge of his mouth and pet at his hair.

"I will be going out. I will also take your key and lock you in."

The attempt Jonathan makes at stopping him is a poor one, but an attempt nonetheless.

"Tell me you are pleased with this match," Dio counters. "Tell me this is something you want and I won't intervene. As promised, I shall be your best man and the uncle to your children."
That the fight has left his cousin is made most apparent when he releases his grip. Dio takes both sets of keys then, locking the front door. The dramatic nature of his departure is greatly hindered when he finds himself stomping back up after taking two steps out the main entrance.

"Umbrella," he mutters, grabbing said accessory.

Jonathan's laughter rings in his ears.

- 

As the Earl is in a conference of his own, Dio ends up meeting with his daughter first.

Seated across the coffee table from her, it becomes apparent that while they were both women with blond hair, Constance Donagan had little similarity with the late Erina Pendleton. Was this how Jonathan could justify the engagement? Because he could clearly distinguish between his childhood fancy and the new woman?

"Mister Brando, is it?" she asks, raising the teacup to her lips.

"It is. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice Miss Donagan. The matter I wish to speak to you requires some confidence."

She follows his gaze to the trio of parlor maids standing at the ready.

"Leave us be."

"Mistress, your father explicitly said -- "

"That I was to remain in the parlor. Yes, I am aware." When she sets her teacup down, Dio notes the tremble in her wrist. In mistaking this to be a fear for him, he reacts accordingly.

"Thank you," he graces, sipping at his own tea.

"Mister Brando, I presume you are here because of the impending engagement?" The lilt of her voice belies a continental education. So, Dio thinks, her convent had been away from England.

"Yes."

In the lapse of conversation, neither tea nor biscuits are touched. She is waiting for him to speak first; as is he.

"When you are married to my cousin," he cannot stop the words from leaving his mouth, or the wretched taste they leave behind, "You are to refer to him as Viscount or Lord Joestar. You may call him Jonathan if he insists, but nothing else."

Instead of any surprise, the Earl's daughter only nods.

"Yes."

"You will be lady of the manor. You will be expected to keep the servants in line. You will be given a wing and a room of your own."

Does she hear the implicit command? Regardless, she only nods again.

"Yes."
"I am permitting this match," Dio continues, "In the hopes that you will give my cousin an heir."

His righteousness is the only thing allowing him to look down on this woman who, for all intents and purposes, held the same rank as Jonathan. But he clings onto that righteousness, fighting to keep the glare from his gaze.

Across the table, Constance sets down her teacup. She clasps her hands and gives a quiet, shuddering chuckle.

"Mister Brando," she addresses, looking him in the eye, "Are you aware of the -- the circumstances of this engagement?"

"Yes."

"Along with the annulment clause?"

Dio is not aware that there had been binding documents drawn up. Internally, he curses Jonathan's sudden proclivity to cleverness and secrecy -- what was the point in getting a degree in law if you were never called upon to use it?

"No."

"I forget the exact wording, but it states that if I am not with child within half a year, the marriage will be annulled on the grounds of impotency."

Now there was a clause uncommon outside of royal marriages.

"My father wants an heir as well, you see," Constance continues, standing up to pluck out another scrapbook of suitors. She sets the book on the table before sitting back down. "And I understand I am a means to an end."

She is remarkably at ease with the idea of treating progeny as pawn. Were all noblewomen like this in private, Dio wonders. Belatedly he realizes that they had only ever encountered women of the peered elite at public events.

"I find your requests agreeable," she concedes, "Amenable, even. However," she pauses, patting down her hair, "I was wondering if you could relay my own set of requests to your cousin."

"Go on."

"I will sleep alone as soon as I am with child."

This is acceptable.

"Yes."

"I will have my belongings brought to the manor. This will include my library and garden and collection of birds."

"Yes."

"The whole of Sunday will be reserved for prayer. As your residence is quite close to a church, I plan to continue my studies outside the convent."

Having little care for what the woman did in her free time, Dio nods.
"That is acceptable."

"No servants from this house are to be permitted in my new dwelling and," she crosses herself here, "If the child is a son, I want nothing to do with him."

As she says her final request, Dio flips to Jonathan's entry in the scrapbook. Although his physique is like that of a labourer, the shorthand reads, it seems his family runs to the boys. He cares in excess for his older cousin and is noted to refuse dances.

Did Cross' wife negotiate a similar agreement with him? Was this a common coping mechanism in marriages of convenience? That the annulment clause existed at all was proof positive that no one was expecting love. This should be his checkmate, Dio knows. The woman is well-read, clearly aware of the nature of their relationship and her own role in it and though her skin was quite sickly and her eyes an unflattering green, her hair was the same sort of blond Jonathan's first love had had. Plus, Dio muses, if she did prove a problem, she could die of unfortunate but understandable circumstances in childbirth and no one would think it unusual.

"Were it not for the death of your brother..." he begins anew.

Constance smiles wryly: "I doubt either of us would consider the engagement otherwise."

He should be satisfied. Her dowry alone would make the match worthwhile, to say nothing of giving Jonathan a child. But there it is, that gut-wrenching fear that Jonathan might grow to enjoy the position of husband and father. Would value it above all else, even.

And this, he knows: while the current conditions were good, they were not good enough.

"Miss Donagan. It seems to me that you are more interested in leaving your father's abode than marrying my cousin."

"As one might find a womb is more interesting than a woman, I suppose." This, she manages to say in a demure manner.

"Then, if I may propose an alternative method..."

The Lord Donagan, Earl of Southampton, chokes on his brandy, neatly spilling the drink over his desk.

"Maid!" he roars, pounding his fist. A maid comes running, and quickly wipes up the spill. Dio takes the opportunity to pull out his own handkerchief and wipe the spittle from his face.

"Thank you. Now, Boy, what were you saying?"

"I would like to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage," Dio repeats.

"Have you lost your mind?" the Earl guffaws, "You may be the old Joestar's adopted son and a damn good barrister at that, but my daughter deserves nothing short of a Viscount!"

"While that may be," Dio concedes, "But my cousin wishes to withdraw his offer. In light of the circumstances of the engagement, I am willing..."

"Nonsense." With force, the Earl pulls on a drawer, rifling through his papers before setting down the agreement. At the bottom of the paper is Jonathan's signature and seal, followed by four
witnesses. "He's already signed here."

"The situation has changed," Dio flippantly replies, "And I wish to expedite things."

"Expedite -- but how! Boy, speak sense."

"I am referring to the annulment clause of the contract." Dio clears his throat, pinning up an embarrassed expression, "It has come to my cousin's attention that, in the event of marriage, an annulment will be unavoidable."

"I don't believe this," the older man scowls, "He's the picture of health! Hardly twenty! You mean to say -- "

"He will, of course, make me his primary heir."

The ball is placed in the Earl's half of the court. As expected, he chases after it.

"And you..." he looks from Dio to the agreement and then to the bottle of brandy, "You're -- you're a blood relation?"

"My mother is the late Viscount's younger sister."

"I see." He tugs on his moustache and furrows his brows. "I see."

"What did you do?" Jonathan asks, after they've made love on the kitchen floor.

"I paid your prospective father-in-law a visit."

"And you told him?"

"In a sense, yes." Dio pushes himself up, stretching his neck and shoulders.

"About us?"

"Patience Jojo," he teases, laughing at Jonathan's expression. So as to fully reassure, he pulls Jonathan up and kisses him. "Be at ease," he instructs, "For it is settled."

Although the Earl waits a week to contact him, when Dio sees the lack of an upcoming engagement announcement in the papers come Monday, he knows already that it's his win.

He receives a telegram on the fifteenth. It is a dinner invitation for Jonathan and himself at the Earl's London residence on the evening of the seventeenth.

"In light of recent developments," the Earl begins as their plates are being set, "And the fact that my daughter seems quite taken with you -- " underneath the table, Dio moves to lightly press down on Jonathan's foot, "I have decided to break off her engagement with the Viscount and give her instead to you."

Jonathan looks appalled.
"What!"

"--a wonderful thing," Dio smoothly finishes, grinding down his heel while ignoring his cousin's muffled choke of pain, "I am most honored, Lord Donagan."

"As am I," Constance adds, lowering her head, "Father."

"But," the Earl harrumphs. "I demand that you change your name."

"My name?" Dio raises an eyebrow.

"Father, that's -- "

"Constance, quiet. Mr. Brando, I understand that your mother was the daughter of a Viscount and you yourself are an adopted son and now heir. But your name..." he shakes his head, "You must understand. I do not want my grandson to have a commoner's surname."

"What!" Jonathan exclaims a second time. "Lord Donagan, to demand this -- "

But Dio smiles, pleasantly surprised to find himself responsive to this idea.

"I understand perfectly, Lord Donagan."

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"This is not what you promised."

"But it is for the best."

"How is it for the best?!!"

"Because this way you can remain faithful to the Pendleton girl and Donagan's sister can inherit her father's fortune. Not to mention the combination of trade routes and the fact that less questions will be asked if one of us has a wife."

"Dio, you can't get married for my sake!"

"Why not?" he counters, "It's not as if you were planning to marry for love."

In lieu of answer, Jonathan seizes his hands, holding on tight.

"You don't have to do this."

"But I want this." He kisses Jonathan with darkened eyes and softly confesses: "I would not be able to stand it, seeing you take a wife."

In the face of his myriad reservations, Jonathan kisses back, at least.

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The Monday after the dinner, Dio files for a petition of name change. His circumstances are somewhat unusual as he had been adopted nearly a decade ago, but as he had been officially adopted and was a direct relative, the courts approve of the deed of change of name with little fuss. The engagement is formally announced in the papers following approval from the courts which, as chance would have it, is on the same date as Jonathan's twenty-first birthday.
"Congratulations are in order," Jonathan reads aloud after they've returned from dinner, "For the auspicious engagement of Miss Constance Donagan (21), the sole living child of Lord Donagan, Earl of Southampton to Mister Dio Joestar (21), the heir and adopted brother of the Viscount Joestar. Their wedding is set for May 11th on the Earl's own docks."

Later, they'll learn that the announcement of the engagement sent ripples throughout high society. How similar the Joestar boys were!, the older ladies will titter, to have no interest in women and then suddenly pursue the same one! And how very much like the Viscount Joestar, the men will chuckle to one another, to give his older cousin the right of way again.

"Mmm," Dio hums from his place on the couch.

"Dio Joestar," Jonathan repeats, trying the name on his tongue. He makes a face. "It sounds so strange."

"Does it?"

"Mm. Well -- do you like it?"

"I do."

"Oh, well then," Jonathan sighs, appeased, "That's alright." He closes the paper and goes to sit next to his cousin.

"Why do you think Father didn't change it when he first adopted you?"

"Out of respect for my real father I suspect." Dio sits up, taking Jonathan's chin in his hand. "Jojo, what's wrong?"

Rather than immediately explain, Jonathan kisses him. Peppers his face with kisses, really, before tonguing at Dio's ear and laving his neck. In contrast to their arguably savage coupling in the kitchen and likely harkening to December at the mansion when they were learning each other's bodies anew, Jonathan is oddly gentle -- reverent, even. He wiggles out of his own waistcoat while Dio does the same, painstakingly unfastening the individual buttons of Dio's dress shirt.

"Jojo," Dio moans, fingers digging into Jonathan's still-covered shoulders. Jonathan's mouth is as hot as ever, tongue flicking against an already-erect nipple.

"Jojo," he says again, pulling Jonathan up to kiss him. Is his face as red as Jonathan's? His ears feel warm. Jonathan kisses him forcefully, again and again, before practically crushing him against the cushions and moving his mouth against Dio's ear.

"Like this," his cousin sweetly mumbles, "It's as if we have been married."

Lost in the heat of the moment, Dio palms at Jonathan's erection.

"Then take me," he urges, "Husband mine."

Something cracks in Jonathan then, for in a matter of seconds, he ruins the mood and throws his arms around Dio's neck, heaving a torturous sob.

"I'm sorry," he blubbers before getting up and dashing off to his own room.

Half-undressed and achingly hard, Dio needs a moment to process the situation. With a quick curse
and a lot of effort, he pushes himself off of the couch.

"Jojo," he calls, crossing into the bedroom.

Jonathan is lying face-down. His shoulders are hunched with remorse and he does not react when Dio seats himself on the bed. Dio reaches over to comb his fingers through Jonathan's hair, sighing when the other man shifts himself.

"I'm sorry Dio," he says. When he shows his face, Dio sees he's on the cusp of tears.

Perplexed but not alarmed, Dio hesitates to speak. He finds it doubtful the tears are an onset of nerves, or that the sudden change in disposition is without reason.

Jonathan allows Dio to pull him up, kissing and petting and stroking. They're both still hard, Dio notes with some exasperation. Though he resists the temptation to finish them off, he can never entirely keep his hands to himself.

"I'm scared of change," Jonathan eventually admits. "But more than that, I'm scared of holding you back."

'I don't want you to get married,' Dio hears and in hearing it, is oddly touched.

"You're overwhelmed," he soothes, "It is sudden, I know."

"When you told me of Miss Donagan's conditions -- and her knowledge of, of us -- I was relieved."

"As you should be."

"But it's wrong," Jonathan insists, "She's to be your wife. The mother of your children."

"It is a marriage of convenience." An auspicious engagement indeed.

"But...!" Jonathan wrings at the bedsheets, at a loss for words.

"I will not love another," Dio reassures. He pushes thoughts of murder out of his mind; it was impossible to think straight when he was close to begging -- and just to be touched!

"I want to make her happy," Jonathan murmurs, taking Dio's face in his hands and pressing their foreheads together.

"It may very well be possible," Dio refrains from adding that the woman seemed most intent on leaving her familial residence.

"We should try for it," Jonathan insists, "An ending where everyone is happy."

"Ever the optimist I see," he nips at Jonathan's lower lip, playfully pinchng his side.

"Someone ought to be," Jonathan gets out. And then they're rolling on the bed while discarding garments left and right.

"Jojo," Dio groans when he's close, "Jojo, wait."

"What is it?"

"Today. Your birthday." Has he been on edge for an hour? It certainly felt like it.
"Oh," Jonathan replies, understanding immediately. "Oh -- yes." He rolls off of Dio only to tumble off the bed.

"Standing up?" Dio asks, clambering to his feet again.

"Mmmhm." Jonathan leads him over to the nearest patch of wall before rummaging through the nightstand. "Could you...?" he uncaps the bottle of oil as Dio moves to rest fully against the wall.

"Taking a page from the plays I see," he murmurs.

"Everything's been done before," is Jonathan's excuse.

"But it is a first time. For us." Dio is unable to still the shiver that courses through him however, when Jonathan reaches down to coat the inside of his thighs.

By the time Jonathan's finished slathering his cock, the now-familiar shade of red has returned to his cheeks. His cousin seems tongue-tied, Dio notes with satisfaction, reaching out to rub away remnants of tears. Jonathan blinks and laughs softly before setting the bottle aside before placing both his hands on Dio's waist. And then he pushes in, a shameless slide of matching pieces, and Dio finds himself just as incoherent as the other.

Although Jonathan moves his hips in a slow and unhurried fashion, he's somehow managed to wedge himself at that perfect angle so that Dio could feel every thrust -- between his thighs and against his cock. Overwhelmed by the contrary sensations, his legs practically buckle upon orgasm -- so much so that he is reliant on Jonathan's grip to keep standing.

For his part, Jonathan chants his name over and over, keeping a steady pace throughout. When he comes, Dio can feel his seed, hot and slick and dripping down his legs.

- Who helps whom back into bed? Who pulls the sheets over them? It's probably Jonathan as Dio can't even remember falling asleep, only waking up the next day with Jonathan sprawled over his chest.

There was a time, he can recall, when he would have scrubbed his hands red after the most casual of touches. And now, now he's waking beneath the other and lazily reaching his hand underneath and noting -- with satisfaction! -- the lingering stickiness between his own thighs.

Dio extricates himself and, in doing so, nearly falls off the bed, making a beeline for the shower. A May wedding. He'll have to ask for another leave of absence from the firm and Webb and Wilcox (and Wei and Pyrce) will need to be formally invited.

But before all that, he smiles at the thought of a suitably ridiculous ensemble for his best man. It wasn't everyday Jonathan agreed to play dress-up after all, and Dio is determined to milk the opportunity for all its worth.
"Yellow?" Jonathan says incredulously, leafing through the base design of the groomsmen's outfits.  

"It's gold."  

"Looks yellow to me."  

"Well that's just a sketch."  

"I don't know, Dio..." Jonathan starts, rubbing at the back of his neck. It's always difficult to talk fashion with his cousin; he's concluded it's something they'll never see eye-to-eye on. "That is a lot of yellow."  

"No it's not." Dio does not say that the tailor had nearly walked out after seeing his initial plans and that this was a greatly toned-down version. "Most of the suit is black."  

"But the yellow --"  

"Gold."  

"Alright, gold," Jonathan rolls his eyes, pointing at the shawl collar, "Is everywhere. All the colors are yellow!" Dio shoots him a look and he clears his throat, "I mean, gold."  

"The bowtie is green," Dio retorts.  

"Why is there a heart on it?" his cousin despairs.  

"I don't need to explain the intricacies of haute couture to you," Dio huffs, "It's my wedding and you are my best man therefore you will shut up and wear what I tell you for once in your wretched --"  

His rant is interrupted by a knock on the door which also saves Jonathan from the ensuing diatribe on his own "hideously plain" choice of clothing.  

"Viscount? Mister Brando?" the landlady calls, "Are you in?"  

"Oh -- yes!" Jonathan runs to open the door, "What is the matter, Countess?"  

"A representative of Messieurs..." she double-checks the missive, "Webb and Wilcox is at the front door. A message for both of you, I believe."  

"I see," A pause. "Well, we'll be there right away!"  

"Keeping more secrets?" Dio asks as they're hastily dressing.  

"Not that I know of." Jonathan considers, "Wilcox should be back from his honeymoon. Perhaps it's to invite us to Webb's wedding?"  

"To call at this hour though..." the clock shows that it's not yet noon, "I hope it's nothing bad."  

"If it were so serious," Dio reasons, "I'm sure they would have come in person."  

"Misters Joestar and Joestar?" the waiting carriage driver asks.  

To fill the air with music ringing
"Yes," Dio replies, elbowing Jonathan.

"Ah -- yes! What seems to be the matter?"

"A telegram from Master Webb if you will," the driver dons a pair of spectacles before pulling out a scrap of paper.

"Good-day, Joestar, Brando. Well, I suppose it should be Joestar and Joestar now. Congratulations on your engagement Brando. Do you know that the Viscountess has given birth? Please -- "

"The Viscountess gave birth?!" Jonathan interrupts. In the interests of dignity, their weekly visits had petered off when Cross' wife entered the final month of her pregnancy.

"Evidently."

"But -- but why weren't we told?"

"Jojo, let the man finish reading."

"Oh. Oh, yes." Jonathan releases his grip on Dio's arm, "Please, continue."

"Thank you. Now, Master Webb continues with: please pay her our respects as neither Wilcox nor I are anywhere near London at the moment. Postscript: Brando, I am furious that you are to be married before me and furthermore a month-long engagement period is scandalous, et cetera, et cetera."

"And this carriage," Jonathan starts, "It's to take us to the Viscountess?"

"Yes sir," the driver nods, pocketing both telegram and spectacles.

"Thank you. We -- we ought to see her right away!" Already, Jonathan is beginning to sweat.

"No," Dio corrects, "We should stop for flowers first."

"Oh yes," Jonathan beams at him, "Flowers." He reaches over to knock on the front of cart, "Excuse me sir, could you stop by a florist on the way to the Viscountess' place?"

"Of course."

Upon hearing the occasion, the florist quickly arranges a bouquet of crocus, tulips, and shellflowers in a lovely assortment of blues, purples, and greens. The flowers are a wish for cheerfulness, abundance, and general good fortune, she tells them.

"Do you think," Jonathan whispers while staring at the blossoms, "That she's dead?"

"I think Webb would mention it if she were."

"But then why would she not tell us of the birth? I thought... well, that we had left on good terms!"

"Hm."

"Do you think she's angry with us?"

"Did you do anything to upset her?"

"Not that I can remember," Jonathan thinks back to the last time they had met with Cross' wife. It
had been before Wilcox's wedding, which was more than a month ago. "Could she have taken offense when I asked if she would attend Wilcox's wedding?"

"Doubtful."

Jonathan stews in silence for the remainder of the ride, practically tripping over the carriage step in his eagerness to greet the new mother. Dio follows his lead, pausing to pay the driver.

"Hello," Jonathan greets, taking off his hat and giving a weak smile, "I am -- "

"The Viscount Joestar, yes," the maid curtsies. "One second, please." Then she cups her hands and hollers down the hallway: "Midwife! Midwife, the Lady has visitors!"

"How do I look?" Jonathan demands, tugging at the ends of his hair while frantically observing his reflection.

"Far too concerned," Dio drawls, wetting his finger to push down an errant lock.

"But I promised Cross that I would -- "

"Jojo. Calm down. Imagine how she -- the Viscountess -- must feel."

Jonathan shuts up and takes a deep breath, just in time for the middle-aged midwife to barrel through the parlor doors.

"Flo! I told you there'd be no visitors!" she casts one glance at the two bachelors and turns her nose up, "And certainly no men!" Despite only reaching their shoulders, the woman seizes them in a chokehold, "Now gentlemen, I'm sorry but you'll have to come back -- "

"No, wait!" Jonathan shrugs her hand off, thrusting the bouquet at the midwife, "You misunderstand. I am -- I am a childhood friend of the Viscount Cross. I was asked to take care of his wife in his absence."

"It's true, ma'am," the maid vouches, "He used to pay the Viscountess visits every Sunday until she could not walk."

"And him?" the midwife jabs a thumb at Dio, "Is he a friend too?"

"My cousin actually."

"Both of them visited," the maid adds.

The midwife scowls. "It took us days to calm her down -- the worst bout of hysteria I've seen!"

"Please let us see her," Jonathan persists, "It -- that is, it's important to know that she's well."

"Misters -- "

"Joestar. Oh, and Joestar."

"We're cousins," Dio reiterates.

"Now you see here Misters Joestar," she purses her lips, "The Viscountess Cross has been under my care since that flounce of a doctor took off. We've calmed her down considerably with various tinctures but there is still one thing you must not speak of her in presence: her husband."
"But -- "

"Not a word, you hear?"

Jonathan looks to his cousin for guidance.

"We understand," Dio says.

"Alright then." She sighs, putting her hands on her hips, "Flo, get the gentlemen some tea and cakes! And for heaven's sakes, call for more laudanum to be brought in!"

Jonathan is justifiably antsy during their walk up the main staircase.

"What do you think she meant by hysteria?" he whispers.

"The medical term," Dio guesses.

Of the two of them, Dio has more experience with the other sex, having known a mother for the first twelve years of his life. The prostitutes at Whitechapel too, certainly gave a firsthand account of female anatomy. But his experiences aren't worth a cup in the well of knowledge and needless to say, neither of them had any experience with pregnant women, new mothers, or newborn infants.

Despite the popularity of male midwives and the recent inclusion of husbands in the birthing chambers, the Viscountess' room is acutely a part of the woman's domain.

"Viscountess," the midwife knocks, "Viscountess, you have visitors."

"Visitors?" Elizabeth Cross' voice calls.

Jonathan gives his cousin a panicked look. The woman sounded faint to say the least.

"Visitors," the midwife repeats. She gives Jonathan a push, "Tell her who you are."

"Viscountess!" Jonathan stammers, "It's me, Jonathan Joestar. I..." he cuts himself off, about to reference Cross, and lamely continues with, "I came to see you. I've brought flowers."

"Joestar?" there's a lilting-laugh, likely the result of laudanum, before the shuffling of sheets, "Come in."

"Viscountess," the midwife chides, immediately going to throw open the curtains, "What have I said about natural lighting?"

"It's far too bright," the newly-made mother complains.

"Is that...?" Jonathan asks, timidly stepping forward.

"Oh," she sighs again, adjusting the swathe of blankets so the baby's face could be seen, "Yes. This is Clarence. Clarence Cross."

Jonathan visibly relaxes.

"Oh," he repeats, "Congratulations! He's beautiful."

"He'll have his father's hair," Elizabeth adds, pressing a kiss to soft brown locks.

The parlor maid brings up tea and cakes and an easy conversation resumes. Jonathan presents the
flowers, Elizabeth asks for a vase, and Dio extends a wedding invitation to the Viscountess. The infant gurgles and suckles, sometimes tugging at the Viscountess' hair, other times reaching for the flowers.

Were this the whole of their interaction, the two of them could be excused in passing off the warning of hysteria to the usual post-pregnancy *douleur*, that sadness following childbirth which men who were not doctors were aware of, though in the foggiest of senses.

But when the child begins to cry, the change is atmosphere is jarring and abrupt.

"Stop crying," Elizabeth demands, holding the child at arm's length.

"Viscountess," the midwife urges, "Viscountess, give the boy here."

Jonathan watches, rooted in stupor to his seat, as the Viscountess deposits the bawling babe into the other woman's arms. Her own hands begin to claw at her ears.

"Stop that racket!" she shrieks, "Hasn't it cried enough?!

"There, there; there, there," the midwife pats the baby's back while a maid rushes to console the mother.

"Give it back," Elizabeth cries, "I want him back."

"Please leave," the midwife instructs, ushering them to the door. "Viscountess, the guests are leaving."

Lost in a world of her own, Cross' wife-come-widow gives an especially bizarre parting.

"That is not my child!"

Jonathan and Dio are hurried out of the room and down the stairs and told by the midwife to come visit at a later date. She does not stay to chat, much less answer any questions, and leaves them with a rushed farewell to return to the Viscountess' side.

Unwilling to comprehend the implications of the situation, Jonathan stares at the floor.

Dio takes his sleeve, trying to pull him to the door.

"Jojo," he hisses, "Jojo, you heard the woman. We'll come visit at a later date."

Jonathan retracts his arm, refusing to exit the parlor.

"What was that about?"

Thankfully, the same parlor maid arrives on the scene, saving Dio from providing an explanation of his own.

"Oh -- oh thank goodness," the maid exclaims, "I was scared you had left. Here, follow me. And whatever you do, please don't tell Madame I told you this!"

Further bewildered, the two men do as told. The maid leads them into the other end of the house, through the games room and kitchen and out into the garden. There is a small cottage, likely intended for the groundskeeper, which she stops before, knocking lightly.

"Lettie?" she asks, "Lettie, are you proper? There are some gentlemen who wish to see -- well, who
"Wish to see."

"Ready now!" a woman's voice calls from inside.

"Please," the maid beckons, allowing Jonathan and Dio to enter first.

Spring sunlight floods the whole of the cottage and it is obvious the room is a newly-made nursery. Seated in the modified armrest is a wet nurse. She holds in her arms a second, noticeably smaller and pinker, infant.

Later, after bearing witness to a birth (and indeed, watching a child grow), the difference between two weeks and two months will be apparent. At the moment, all Jonathan notices is that the second baby has no hair.

"What is the meaning of this?" he frowns.

Dio, having a better grasp on the weakness of human nature, could hazard a guess. He keeps quiet however, allowing the maid to explain.

"This is the mistress' child," the maid confirms.

"What?! But -- but -- " Jonathan looks from the second infant to the main house, "What about the other one?"

"The midwife's grandson. The Viscountess was already unwell you see. When she found out her child was a girl..." she bites back a sob, unable to speak.

"She tried to drown her," the nursemaid murmurs, holding the baby girl close.

Jonathan refuses to believe this.

"She'll get better," the maid insists, "It was just the shock. Since the Viscount has been away for so long and of course a girl won't be able to inherit his title..."

"It can't be," Jonathan whispers.

"She'll be taken care of," the nursemaid promises, "The Viscountess' relations have seen to that."

"It's just that," the maid wrings her hands, "I find it so sad! She's a very healthy girl, and so sweet-tempered too!"

"Florence," the nursemaid warns.

"I know, I know." she smiles sadly at Jonathan, "You understand, don't you? It must be so difficult, having a title of your own. I can't imagine bearing so much responsibility."

Jonathan fishes for the right words, vainly trying to rearrange his priorities.

"And the girl -- " he starts, "Does she have a name?"

"We couldn't very well Christian her as Clarence!"

"Then -- "

"Oh, I'm sure her mother will give her a name," the nursemaid reassures. "Each new mother is different, though all of them experience some set of nerves. Give her a month or two."
"We've been calling her Lisa in the meantime," the maid conspiratorically whispers as she's letting Jonathan and Dio go. "But -- I meant to show you this to relieve you. She'll be in good hands, I promise."

"Thank you," Jonathan murmurs. He trips on his way up the carriage step, though Dio prevents an all-out fall.

- 

"I don't understand it."

"What's there to understand?"

"It's -- " he swallows, "It's not right."

Strangely enough, the vestiges of amity Dio had felt towards Cross are dredged up and he finds himself defending the other man's wife.

"In the absence of all agency," he reasons, "Is it so difficult to understand why people might turn to the absurd?"

"What agency?"

"If it is as you said and Cross left his wife without telling her," Jonathan nods firmly here, "It is possible she found her own reasons for his absence."

"Outside of Donagan, you mean?"

It is Dio's turn to roll his eyes then. "No. More that she believed providing an heir would hasten his return."

"Did she tell you this?"

"Hardly."

"Then it's ridiculous," Jonathan dismisses. "After Cross realizes that Donagan is dead, he'll come back and they can have a boy."

He catches the open pity in Dio's gaze and frowns again.

"What?"

"Jojo," Dio sighs, shaking his head, "I wonder, do you listen to yourself?"

"Someone must," Jonathan replies, laughing without humor.

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"Is there anything in the laws against daughters inheriting?" Jonathan asks later that night.

"Women are not normally treated as heirs."

"But what of the Queen?"

"That's royalty. They follow different laws."

"But it can't be unprecedented!"
Dio groans, rubbing at his face. "Jojo, do you really want an explanation of inheritance laws at this hour?"

"Yes."

He rubs at his temples. It was equal parts impossible to be angry or concentrated. He settles for another sigh before launching into an abridged recount of the current legal situation.

"In the case of a single female child, an inheritance is possible. The estate and the finances, at least, would likely be given to the daughter provided the deceased did not have a male heir."

"So then -- "

"Wait. Listen. There are two problems with both Cross' daughter and Donagan's sister. First, Donagan does not own anything, his father does. And the Earl does not want his titles to be passed without capital, which is why he's intent on having a male heir."

"So there's no chance of a daughter inheriting the title?"

"No. None. And then there's the issue of investments -- and trust funds and trustees -- all made because women are barred from most of the financial sector. But before that -- Cross left you in charge of his estate."

"I could write it off to his daughter."

"His daughter is an infant."

"But if it would make the Viscountess feel at ease..."

"More than that, Cross actually does own property. But you are not his heir. You may manage his property, but it will be an uphill battle to transfer it. This is because, in the eye of the law, neither of them are dead."

Having finished his spiel, Dio lies back down.

"I see," Jonathan says.

"I can't believe you were prepared to marry a woman without knowing why," his cousin mutters, pulling the sheets close.

"Hey! I knew perfectly well why -- "

"And yet you didn't bother reading the agreement."

"I didn't -- wait. How do you know?"

"The Earl showed me the papers. Obviously."

Too tired to argue further, Jonathan throws his arms over Dio, heaving another sigh.

"I don't know what's worse," he declares, "That Donagan's sister is using you to get at what should rightfully be hers or that Cross' daughter can only stand to inherit after he's pronounced dead."

"It could still work." Dio pauses. "If neither of them were dead."
"But we can't just wait around," Jonathan declares the next morning. "Duke Kensington certainly didn't."

"But neither of us were of age."

"Still." Jonathan grimaces, "I think I understand Father better now. Part of growing up is constantly preparing for the worst."

"And you call yourself an optimist," Dio snorts, pulling his ear.
In line with his newfound philosophy, Jonathan throws himself at the account-books. Although the best case scenario was that both Cross and Donagan returned in one piece, the worst case scenario was, of course, for neither of them to return. Dio has explained that in Cross’ case, where all contact had stopped after he left England but no real accident had been ascertained, it could take as long as seven years for his absence to be considered a legal death.

In his heart of hearts, Jonathan had been prepared to manage the other man's estate for a couple months -- half a year at most. But the agreement Cross had written out did not have such a timeframe. He was effectively a trustee of a non-existent trust. It is important then, that if the worst came to pass, he would not have let the capital collect dust.

And so it is that when Speedwagon comes calling the Monday of, the living room and parlor are practically drowned in looseleaf sheets.

"Speedwagon!" Jonathan beams, "Long time no see!"

"Mr. Joestar! Ah, I must decline from shaking..." he carefully removes his muddy boots and dripping raincoat, "In fact, may I use your washroom?" The other man lifts his grit-covered hands in explanation.

"By all means! Shall I run the hot water for you?"

"No, no, I'm not so dirty as to need a shower!"

"Tea and biscuits then," Jonathan busies himself with the preparation thereof, "Sorry for the state of things... an old friend's wife gave birth so I've started seriously thinking about the future."

"Not at all," Speedwagon dries his hands before stepping over two piles of paperwork.

Jonathan sticks a hand out the window and then looks curiously at his friend.

"It's not raining," he remarks.

"I didn't get in this state by walking through the rain," Speedwagon laughs.

"Then...?"

"I was helping unload a new shipment of horseless carriages," he rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck, "A good workout, certainly!"

"I see..." Jonathan looks at him awkwardly, "Do you... do you enjoy manual labour?"

"As much as one can enjoy it," Speedwagon shrugs.

"But then..."

"Mr. Joestar," the older man smiles kindly, "I'm sure you didn't call me over to talk of muck and mud, however much of it I may be carrying."

"Of course not! Here, here," Jonathan leads them to the hastily-cleaned table where refreshments were waiting, "Have you seen the papers recently?"
"Oh! Your cousin's engagement you mean? He has my congratulations."

"Oh yes!" Jonathan grins, "Well that's what I've called you over for. I was wondering if -- "

"I certainly have the time to attend, Mr. Joestar!"

"No, no, if you'd like to be a groomsman!"

Speedwagon flushes, evidently very flattered. "A groomsman? Me?" He laughs, "Mr. Joestar, I'm surely too old for this sort of thing...!"

"I'm sure there's no age limit."

"But it's common practice!" Speedwagon pauses, remembering that this was an invitation for Dio's wedding and not Jonathan's, and quickly adds: "Are you sure your cousin wants me there?"

"He didn't say otherwise. Besides, I'm to be the best man!" Jonathan rifles through the papers, pulling out the tailor's sketch from Saturday morning, "Look at this, Speedwagon! Look at those garish colors!"

Speedwagon looks. He does not, however, cringe.

"Dio is dead-set on having me wear this, but I've at least convinced him to dress all the groomsmen in the same manner. Speedwagon," he pleads, "Don't leave me to look like a fool!"

"I don't see what's wrong with it," Speedwagon admits.

Jonathan blanches, clutching at his knowledge of color coordination.

"It's -- it's all so mismatched!"

"But certainly outstanding. Very much like your cousin's style."

"But I'm the one who'll be wearing it!"

"Have you seen the groom's dress?"

"No."

"Well," Speedwagon grins, "My money's on it being more spectacular that that."

"You're probably right..." Jonathan shudders. "So will you not be a groomsman?"

"Well if your cousin is alright with it... and as I still owe you two my life..."

"Fantastic! It's set for the eleventh of May at Southampton, we'll likely take a carriage there on the ninth if you'd like to come along and..." Jonathan stops then, seeing his friend look at a particularly convoluted set of accounts. "Speedwagon...?"

"Are these your papers Mr. Joestar?" Speedwagon asks.

"Mm, yes! My apologies for the clutter, I'm still sorting them out."

"One second," he raises a sheet up and frowns, "Do you have a spare pen and paper?"

"Yes. Ah, let me get them."
"If I may," Speedwagon rolls up his sleeves, pen poised over the blank sheet. Jonathan watches on in slack-jawed silence as, in a matter of minutes, the ex-gangster from Ogre Street alters the whole listing of tables in his copy. Speedwagon double-checks his work before blowing on the ink, lifting the new arrangement of accounts for show.

"Now see here," he explains, pointing to the new columns, "Rather than order by amount -- "

"I should sort them by month," Jonathan completes, clapping his hands, "Brilliant!"

"...Did they not teach you this in school?"

"Not that I know of, no."

"I'm surprised your older cousin hasn't charged himself with these..."

"Dio?" Jonathan laughs, "He's even worse with numbers than I am!" He sees Speedwagon working his way through a second table and flails, "Speedwagon, that's really not necessary...!"

"But Mr. Joestar, shouldn't friends help each other out? Besides," he looks up to flash to confident smile, "back in Whitechapel, I was the one in charge of finances. You could even say numbers are my specialty."

And so Jonathan watches, transfixed, as the figures and charts he had spent so many nights attempting to organize are, quite simply, aligned.

"Speedwagon," he stammers out when it is half past six and the other man has worked through a tenth (a tenth!!) of the accounts, "This is presumptuous of me, but I was wondering if I might be able to employ your..."

"Nonsense!" Speedwagon scoffs, putting on his boots and coat before donning his signature hat, "Did you charge a fee for a Windknights? I wouldn't dream of doing the same!"

"But -- " Jonathan struggles to think of a proper reason, "But what of your friends' widows?"

"What of them?"

"I could pay you... so you could give it to them. That is why you're working right now, isn't it?"

Speedwagon does shake his hand then, with a grip so tight Jonathan fears his fingers might snap.

"You're a good man, Mr. Joestar. I never forget it, but you constantly remind me of it anyways. A true nobleman!"

"Now you're just flattering me."

"I'll see you on the 'morrow!" Speedwagon calls, letting himself out.

Jonathan returns to the papers and shakes his head in disbelief.

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"We live in a wonderful world," he tells Dio over dinner, "The Hugh Hudson song was right, I think." He hums a line or two from it to demonstrate: "But let them not babble of Greek to the rabble / Nor teach the mechanics their letters..."

"You realize I have yet to memorize the song," Dio interjects between a mouthful of venison.
"But you sang along for graduation!"

"Mouthed the right words, you mean."

"I'd like to ask Speedwagon to help with managing the estate," Jonathan declares. He stands up and brings over the newly-done accounts, "I'll have to convince him of course but look -- see?"

Dio raises both eyebrows.

"And the one on the left is your copy?"

"Yes."

"I see." He shrugs, "Well, if he's that much more efficient..."

"I've invited him to be a groomsman as well." Jonathan makes a face, "He seemed to think the suit was acceptable!"

Dio preens a little then. Well, a lot.

While Jonathan is fighting the uphill battle for a trusted overseer of accounts (not accountant, he quickly disclaims, for apparently the Whitechapel resident knew a thing or two about safe investments to boot!), Dio goes to pay his fiancée a second visit.

After they're exchanged the usual pleasantries and she's dismissed the parlor maids a second time, Dio cuts to the chase:

"My real father was a violent alcoholic and I would rather die than allow his genes to pass on."

Constance sets her teacup down, tilting her head.

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Don't you?"

For a woman raised under the cloth, Donagan's half-sister is most calculating. But then, Dio later reasons, well-read women did tend to be shrewish. Which only compounded the frustration he felt towards his own mother, who clearly let her emotions get the better of her with regards to marriage.

"Mister Brando, have you ever seen an un clothed woman?"

"Yes." Sure, he had never touched them, but he had seen his fair share.

"I cannot say the same. Furthermore," she takes a long sip of tea, "I find it disagreeable, that I should see someone else as only their beloved ought to see them."

This is their marriage in a nutshell: implications upon implications.

Dio holds his breath, waiting.

"I shall ask the doctor for a sleeping draught before our wedding. After taking it, I will cover my eyes and stuff my ears."
A brief but heady silence follows her declaration.

"You are the daughter of an Earl," Dio states, continuously surprised at the woman's propensity for -- well, deceit. "What reason do you have to take such risks?"

"I did not want to get married. Still do not, in fact." She returns teacup to saucer and tugs back the hair on her forehead. When Dio is understandably surprised, she gives another unhappy smile before pushing the blond hair back into place.

"Wigs have been out of fashion for ages," she explains, "So very few know of my real hair color. Old families have their secrets; our ancestry is our shame. With my brother, it is not so apparent, but as for my father and myself..." she swallows, pursing her lips, "It does not matter how south we move, blood will not lie."

"Then -- this match?"

"Father is just as intent as I, for different reasons of course. He's traced your genealogy and found it most suitable."

"I see." Dio takes her hand and kisses it before standing up. "Thank you for your understanding Miss Donagan. I do not think I shall see you before the eleventh."

"Until then," she replies, and from her tone he thinks she will be counting down the days.

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After the meeting with Constance, Dio takes the carriage back to Fitzroy Square. Rather than go in however, he turns right at the entrance to the square, walking and walking until he stood before a particularly discreet house of ill-repute. The entrance fee is not as absurd as Wei's brothel, though he needs to pay extra to take the merchandise out.

The boy looks sixteen, perhaps seventeen. Certainly younger than himself and with a noticeably inferior physique.

"Where will you have me, sir?" he asks, when Dio leads him out.

"Follow me."

Rather than have a carriage driver be witness, he takes the Underground as close as possible to Whitechapel, and then walks the youth the rest of the way. The unnamed boy is quick to learn at least. His inane questions have long since petered out by the time Dio arrives at the brothel with an underground floor.

"What the -- " the boy flusters, "Sir, I can't go in there!"

"I am not paying you for conversation," Dio murmurs, smoothly slipping a couple more shillings into the patchwork pocket. "After you," he says, pulling open the front door.

As expected, the boy has been put through worse. He does not flinch when Dio kills two mice, though his eyes widen at the sight of two crowns.

"Sir," he tries again, when Frederick has allowed them through the left door, "What sort of pleasures... what do you have in mind?"

Dio ignores him again, asking for any girl who wouldn't mind an unusual request. He's given one,
a woman with dark hair and dark eyes easily double the boy's age.

"You'll do," he says, leading the boy into the private room.

The woman, at least, knows what to expect. She strips herself bare and reclines against the divan, touching herself.

The boy, on the other hand, betrays his age from the get-go, hovering at the closed door and shifting from one foot to the next.

"Sir," he stammers, "I'm not sure I know..."

"Strip," Dio commands.

This, at least, the boy does with ease.

"Now go to her."

"Relax," the prostitute giggles, spreading her legs further, "It's not the first time I've been asked this."

Despite her grip about the boy's cock, he remains unerect.

"I'm sorry," he gasps out, hanging his head in shame, "I've -- it's just that -- my body's been trained to..."

"I understand," the woman purrs, thumbing at his hipbone before digging her fingers into his backside.

Though Dio is aware of this method of arousal, he has never seen it in the flesh. There's something comical, he thinks, when the boy's cock gives a twitch and then begins to thicken -- all without being touched.

"Go on," he says, when the boy is finally leaking. The prostitute extricates her fingers and then pushes her hips.

Despite the moan he gives upon entering her, the boy still needs to be coaxed into climax: laquered nails digging -- deeper and deeper still. He comes with a sigh-slash-cry, whole body pitching forward, and his face ends up cushioned between her bare breasts. She, the prostitute, only laughs, wrapping her legs about his waist and thrusting her hips with more force.

"Darling," she calls to Dio, "Wouldn't you like to join?"

He should, should not, should not, be thinking of his cousin and fiancée. It is easy to disconnect the two of them from this picture, and easier still to overlay them as man and woman.

Having seen enough, he pays his due and exits. The extra shillings he had given the boy would be sufficient for him to find his way home.

Although it is half past ten when he returns to the flat, he insists on a shower. Jonathan has woken up again by the time the water's stopped and, judging by the gleam in his eye, he has convinced Speedwagon that his services should be paid for.

"Welcome back," Jonathan greets.

"You needn't have waited," Dio murmurs, going over to kiss him.
And he can see it: the bright line between points. If all that was Jonathan's was his, then the converse must be true as well. Seeing as how they already shared a bed, a surname, finances, and an estate, was it so much of a stretch to share a son?

-  

Come May and Speedwagon and Jonathan (though mostly the former) have finished reordering the accounts and can finally begin long-term minimal-risk investments. And so it is that Jonathan eases into his role of best man, finally decked out in the yellow/gold-decorated suit of Dio's commission.

"Oh Joestar," Webb commiserates at the groomsmen's table, "Why didn't you tell me you gave such sappy speeches? If I had a heart, I would've cried!"

"It's Joestar," Pyrce laughs, "Everything about him is sappy!"

"But look," Webb motions to Wilcox, who is pointedly looking the other way, "You've brought the conscience-less banker of Canary Wharf to tears!"

"Shut up," Wilcox grumbles, dabbing at the corners of his eyes. "It was sand."

"Sand indeed."

"I'm just glad no one fell asleep," Jonathan admits, "I cut out a lot, you know?"

"You've got a gift with speeches, Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon compliments. "I'm sure your cousin is touched."

The five of them turn towards the ballroom in unison where Dio and his now-wife were leading the dances.

Pyrce laughs, "Just wait and see Joestar, soon you'll be the only bachelor left!"

"We've placed bets on whether you'll be entering a convent at this rate," Webb jokes.

"But... but what of Speedwagon?"

"Oh I don't know Mr. Joestar..." said bachelor replies, grinning, "I'm not sure either of us are destined for bachelorhood!"

"But Mr. Speedwagon," Pyrce exaggerates, "Surely you know it's what Joestar aims for at every opportunity!"

Jonathan laughs too, turning back around and reaching for the oriental fruits brought by Wei. As Southampton was, by nature, a port city, international visitors could come and go with ease. Nuttall and her husband, along with Zeppeli and his wife and son, and of course Wei with his fiancée, had all managed to journey from France, Italy, and China respectively. In addition to bringing his fiancée (who did not speak a word of English but managed to make Wei consistently lose his temper -- and the woman gave as good as she got!), Wei had also brought a treasure trove of indigenous fruits, the most curious of which was a plum-sized berry with white flesh and a pinkish-red rind.

"Mr. Joestar," Wei cautiously begins, "You're -- that is, I believe it tastes better without the skin."

"Mm, is that so? But I like the texture," Jonathan admits, crunching through said rind.
"What are these called again?" Wilcox asks.

"Li-zhi."

"Litz?"

"...close enough." Wei takes one for himself, peeling away the rind and popping the fruit in his mouth.

The women descend upon them soon enough, dragging the four married and engaged men away in their wake.

"I do worry for you though, Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon says as they're watching Pyrce compete with Nuttall for most off-tempo footwork, "You don't strike me as a lifelong bachelor."

"Does anyone?"

"I like to think I do! What wife would put up with the care of some twenty-five other women, widows or no?"

Jonathan smiles and pats the other man on the shoulder. He gives a broken little smile before adding:

"It's enough to love, isn't it?"

As friends are wont to do, Speedwagon readily agrees.

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Right before the communal dinner, Jonathan accosts his cousin in the washroom.

"Congratulations," he says again.

"Thank you," Dio looks at him oddly before reaching out to readjust his lapels. "See," he murmurs, fixing the collars and sleeves as well, "It's not so embarrassing is it? The gold becomes you, I would say."

"Of course you would say," Jonathan retorts, though he allows the other man to fuss over him. Once Dio is finished, he reaches out in-turn, carefully unfastening the first three buttons of his dress shirt.

Dio can't help but shiver; Jonathan's fingers are so warm, even when they're just ghosting his neck.

"Jojo."

"Oh don't worry," Jonathan disclaims, "I remember what we promised. But, um," he digs in his pocket and pulls out a platinum strand. He mumbles some half-baked excuse while his fingers fumble with the clasp. When Jonathan carefully loops the pendantless accessory about his neck, he shivers a second time. They could do it, he knows -- wants nothing more, even, especially when Jonathan is brushing back the hairs on his nape to refasten the necklace. Does Jonathan want the same? His face is as red as ever and he refuses to make eye contact, leaning in to brush his lips against Dio's cheek.

"I love you," Dio says instead.

"And I, you," Jonathan replies, redoing the three buttons.
"Be kind to her, please," he adds as they're en route for the dining room. "She is to be the mother of your child after all."

As there was no chance of Jonathan believing the truth (and an even smaller chance for him to speak it), Dio grunts noncommittally.

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Though they are seated side-by-side with the Earl at the head of the table and Constance to his immediate right, the wedding supper is filled with too many congratulations and toasts for the two of them to have any meaningful conversation.

On the pretense of picking up a fallen handbag, Dio drugs his own drink under the dining cloth and then switches his glass with Jonathan's. In the end, he's settled for a prescribable sleeping draught - most likely the same concoction his wife would be taking.

It is in preparation of his wedding night that he's asked Jonathan to abstain in the handful of days before the wedding. What did his cousin think?, that Dio was saving some part of himself for his bride? But as he had not asked for an explanation, Dio had not bothered.

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After helping a woozy Jonathan back to his assigned room (across the hallway from Dio's) and making sure the other man was out cold, Dio returns to the bridal suite, unsurprised to find his wife helped out of her wedding ensemble and lying prone on the bed. As promised, she's blindfolded herself and covered her ears.

After he's made his peace, he'll admit (albeit only to himself) that the whole situation could be seen as nothing short of a farce. Here he was, dragging his voluntarily-drugged wife to couple with his unknowingly-drugged cousin-and-lover! Of course he would have preferred to carry Jonathan to their rooms, but seeing as how Constance was half his weight and no one would bat an eye if he was caught carrying his wife about the hallways...

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The specifics -- he cannot remember. Does not want to, really.

The sex act was difficult enough with one unresponsive partner, to have two living puppets was effectively a nightmare.

It had been a poor decision to remove Jonathan's nightclothes too. Dio finds himself concentrating unnecessarily on the five-pointed star on his cousin's upper right shoulder. He had always known of the existence of said birthmark, apparently it ran through the Joestar family, but as they tended to lie face-to-face, he never truly noticed it.

Jonathan has rubbed off on him, more than he'd like to admit. Although he is still certain that sex could be separated from love, he cannot shake the sense that something is horribly, horribly wrong.

When he is plying Jonathan as the prostitute plied the callboy, he realizes that, although Jonathan is naked and hard and entirely wedged in his lap, he himself is completely limp.

Good, he viciously thinks at the time, it was good that he was distinguishing between passion and physiological response.
When the deed is done, he cleans both non-participants up, covering his wife in the blood-stained sheet and pulling his cousin's nightclothes on.

He carries Constance back to their room and is mindful enough to remove the blindfold and earplugs at least. He covers her up too and then goes into the washroom to scrub his hands red.

It is the sound of the running water that snaps him out of his daze. Belatedly, he realizes that he had not made a sound for the duration of the act.

Realizing it, along with the absurdity of the situation, he begins to laugh. Watching his reflection twist onto itself, he laughs and laughs, pushing the sound through his lungs until his sides hurt, until he's clutching at his stomach and kneeled against the bathtub, until he's gasping into the service line for alcohol, more alcohol.

When Constance wakes in the morning, prepared to show her father the proof of consummation, she finds her husband passed out between the armchairs in a drunken stupor.

The weight of their crime hits her at once -- more than perversion or infidelity, Dio wanted to raise a bastard son as his own.

There was no proof of course. But the people would talk, especially if their child was the spitting image of his uncle.

Their week-long honeymoon in Normandy is thus spent in uneasy silence with separate rooms and separate carriages. Some nights, she thinks she hears her husband laughing in the adjoining room. She does not think to ask. And so it is, at the end of the week, she heads off to the Joestar manor and he returns to London.
In the week-long honeymoon which leaves Dio on the coasts of Normandy, Jonathan busies himself with work. Between preparations for his cousin's wedding, for his sister-in-law's arrival at the manor, and Petrie's next expedition to Egypt, he has hardly had time to read the news! The first couple days are spent reacquainting himself with current affairs: the votings and vetoings of Parliament as well as the various International Congresses now under their employ. On Wednesday, he returns to the accounts and is delighted (but not at all surprised) to find that Speedwagon had gone through all of his files, reordering and relabelling nearly everything. Only the records which he had copied straight from his father were deemed unneeding any change.

Speedwagon pays him a visit on Thursday, and they talk about future investments and the state of the world economy. He expresses his sympathies for the in limbo state of Cross and Donagan's estates while echoing Jonathan's hopes for the best possible of outcomes. In his own quietly tactful manner, he forgoes any mentioning of Dio or his wedding, likely noticing Jonathan's own discomfort. It is in Speedwagon's avoidance of the subject that Jonathan notices how eager he is to place the whole situation out of sight and out of mind. It is a sin, he knows, and he is every bit as guilty -- if not moreso -- as Dio.

At some point, his brooding must catch up with his expression, as Speedwagon stops his scratch-scratching of parchment to place a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Joestar," his friend lightly admonishes, "What have I told you about carrying the weight of the world?"

"That I shouldn't?"

"That's right. For what good are friends, if you can only depend on them in times of prosperity?" Speedwagon vehemently shakes his head, "No, Mr. Joestar, true friends ought to share their sorrows too."

"And you are a true friend," Jonathan readily replies, "I'd hate to think where I'd be without you."

"Not dead, that's for sure!"

They share a laugh, a morbid one which is cut short by Jonathan's sigh.

"It is Dio," he admits, "I'm anxious to see him again."

Where could he even begin? He racks his mind on how to water down his anxieties, how to detract from his real worries.

"Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon says. Pats his shoulder again and does nothing more.

Is this, Jonathan wonders, how he appeared before Cross? A not-entirely-unbiased spectator who was nonetheless far closer with one party than the other? At the very least, he hopes he had had a similarly sympathetic expression on, the sort of face which allowed all of one's confessions with none of the condemnations.

"Speedwagon," he chokes out, suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to speak, "May I -- may I tell you something in confidence?"

"But of course, Mr. Joestar," his friend dutifully says.
"Dio and I, well, we've been -- " he plucks forth all his courage so that he maintains eye contact, "Lovers." Though he does not look away, he does cringe. It sounds so ridiculous, saying it like that.

Rather desperately, he tries to justify it: "But we've not been for long! Since last December actually!"

Hesitantly, he looks at Speedwagon. If the other man were still wearing his hat, Jonathan thinks it would have flown off. As it is, the scar running down the middle of his face is nearly stretched straight with how high his eyebrows have risen.

"Lovers?" his friend repeats.

"Yes." Dio would have them lie before the servants, before the other nobles, before the courts even! But he will not be ashamed -- not before his friend.

Jonathan's judgement turns out to be correct once again. Speedwagon quickly gets ahold of himself, scooting out of his seat to throw his arms about the younger man.

"Mr. Joestar, I'm so sorry. Does anyone else know?"

"No," Jonathan shakes his head, relaxing in the embrace. "Dio made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone. You must not let him know I've told you."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" Speedwagon pulls back then, dabbing at his eyes, "I knew a pair of male lovers back in Whitechapel. And even in Whitechapel, they were -- " he heaves a breath, "-- mistreated. I can only begin to think of how much more pressure you must feel, Mr. Joestar! In someone of your rank!"

"It's not so bad," Jonathan is quick to affirm, "I just... I guess I'm feeling anxious now because Dio is getting married." He pauses, and then corrects himself: "Is already married."

"And his wife? Does she know?"

"He said she did," Jonathan whispers, "But I was too scared to speak with her myself. I'm a coward, truly."

"How you can bear to see your beloved married is beyond me," Speedwagon retorts, shaking his head.

"If it is as Dio said -- that she only wishes to marry him to leave her familial abode and give her father an heir -- then it would be the best possible situation. But I'm scared, Speedwagon. Scared that that's not the case."

"Have you not yet spoken with your sister-in-law?"

"No. No, I have. Spoken with her, that is."

"Enough to judge her character?"

Jonathan considers this, and then nods.

"Did she seem untrustworthy?"

He shakes his head.

"What of your cousin then? Would he lie to you?"
Again, Jonathan shakes his head.

"Then you're worrying unnecessarily, Mr. Joestar," Speedwagon confidently declares. "I may not know your cousin as well as I know you, but I know a schemer when I see one and your cousin is one through and through. And how he cares for you! When he barreled through the hospital doors, I honestly thought he was your lover at first!" Speedwagon chuckles, "Well, I suppose I was right the first time."

Jonathan laughs too, and then gives a great sigh of relief. How much of a difference having a friend made!, he thinks, and what a reassuring thing -- to be able to confess one's worries on another human being!

"Thank you, Speedwagon, truly." He clasps the other man's shoulder, bowing his head, "More than managing the accounts or looking into investments or leading us in and out of Windknights -- 

"Ah, ah, ah," Speedwagon tuts, "I should be saying the same thing. More than giving me a salary or inviting me to your cousin's wedding or saving my life three times, I must thank you, Mr. Joestar, for coming with me to explain and apologize to my friends' widows. If you weren't there that afternoon... well, I don't think I could've gotten through it."

"I feel the same," Jonathan insists, smile wide, "Already, I'm feeling much better, just knowing that you know."

"What cruel times we live in," Speedwagon mourns, clasping Jonathan's hand, "That even someone like you, Mr. Joestar, must hide their love away!"

"We are where we are," Jonathan shrugs, "And if I were not born now, I would not have met you."

"I must be leaving now," his friend protests, "Or you'll have me leaving in tears. Imagine -- even Speedwagon made to cry!" he shakes his head, "No, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Speedwagon!" Jonathan calls as the other man is descending the steps, "Speedwagon, if there's ever anything -- anything -- I can do for you, no matter what, you need only ask!"

Like a true friend, Speedwagon laughs and waves and adds: "I say the same to you, Mr. Joestar!"

It really helps, Jonathan thinks, to have a friend to talk to. And so it is that he calls for a carriage to the Joestar manor on Friday morning. Dio would be back in London on the nineteenth; Constance, presumably, would return to the manor a day before.

When he arrives at the estate, he finds that his new sister-in-law's belongings have just arrived. Her books alone take up a whole carriage and there are two crates filled with different versions (and translations) of the Bible! Gardening implements take up most of the second carriage (though, Jonathan notes with some relief, there are crates marked as clothing) while the aforementioned bird collection is carted over in the third. The birds and tools are sent to the greenhouse; her books and clothing are sent to her wing. As their rooms are in the south wing, he gives her a set of suites facing the north.

Briefly, he frets over the lack of a balcony; unfortunately only two rooms on the second floor had a balcony -- even his Father's room hadn't had one!

Should he switch their wings entirely? Constance would be spending more time in the manor than either of them -- at very least for the rest of the year! But then, what if Dio had specified she would
be in the North Wing? He ends up writing his sister-in-law a note, saying that if she found her current set of rooms unsatisfactory, he would gladly trade with her. He leaves further instructions with the butler to oversee any room changes, should they be necessary, and furthermore ensure that the new lady of the manor wanted for naught.

"Oh Viscount," the old butler sighs, dabbing at his eyes as well, "You've really grown up."

"Have I?" Jonathan asks. At times like these, he feels like a twelve-year-old boy playing pretend.

"You have," the old man smiles, "And it makes me very proud to see it. Your father is smiling down on you, you can be sure of that!"

After paying his respects to his father, mother, and dog, Jonathan takes the same carriage back. Upon returning, he realizes how much noisier London is -- and how quiet the countryside was -- and worries again about his sister-in-law adjusting to the changes. Even Southampton, with its harboring of more ships than tenements, was far livelier than the area surrounding the Joestar manor. What if she disliked it? What was there to do, really?

Determined to eat dinner with Dio on the night of his return, Jonathan ends up succumbing to sleep on the sofa. He's up on his feet and bolting towards the door as soon as the lock turns however, practically tackling Dio in his eagerness.

"Dio!" he shouts, "Dio, welcome back!"

"I'm back," Dio says, returning the embrace. Jonathan backs off, allowing his cousin to take off his outer garments (as well as fully enter the flat). Then he switches on the lights and leads Dio to his bedroom.

In the light, his cousin looks tired. Haggard, even. Mistakenly, Jonathan attributes this to marriage, to consummation, to the travel from Le Havre to Southampton (and then Southampton to London!).

"I missed you," is all he says before turning off the lights and pulling the other into bed.

There is a stretch of silence so long that he thinks Dio must've fallen asleep.

And then his cousin says --

"I missed you too."

-- and Jonathan relaxes prematurely.

For although there is another stretch of silence and although both of them are relaxed, Dio eventually begins to move, with a jagged sort of desperation that reminds Jonathan of their time in January.

"Dio," he says, even as he's shifting his limbs to make room, "Dio, aren't you tired?"

Despite the darkness, Dio kisses him.

"No," he replies. "Are you?"

Jonathan shakes his head, trying to kiss back, but Dio has already moved on, hands wandering, wandering down and down and down.
There is a sharpness to his cousin's motions that only sets him on edge after the fact. With Dio, he always feels two steps behind; mere seconds behind a missed train.

Blindly, he tries to return the favor, only for his wrist to be snatched at and forced down.

"Jojo," Dio growls, "Stay still."

Yes, Jonathan can admit this much: his need for physical intimacy was never as great as his cousin's. Would never be as great, even. But he still needed it to some extent, especially after half a year of it only for a sudden week-long return to an empty bed -- and he is just as needy and lust-filled as he had been for their return to London.

But Dio does not rut against him, or even slide between his thighs. Rather, he wraps his fingers around Jonathan's already-thickened shaft and strokes and squeezes and thumbs until Jonathan bucks his hips and cries out the same thing as always.

As soon as his vision returns, he gropes about in the dark, only to discover Dio was still limp.

"Dio -- " it's all he can say, really.

Ever so gently, Dio removes his hand, lifting it up to kiss at it.

"Go to sleep Jojo," his cousin says.

Jonathan is too tired to argue, so he does.

- 

The next evening, Jonathan takes the initiative. But Dio is again unresponsive. Jonathan's hand is lifted again, kissed at again, and then Jonathan himself is pushed bodily against the bed.

They tumble and fumble, clothes being thrown onto the floor, until it becomes obvious neither of them will be aroused. Dio holds him close then, long breaths hot against the shell of his ear, and Jonathan closes his eyes, searching for the right words to say.

"Was it so exhausting?" he asks, trying to keep a light tone.

"What?"

"The honeymoon."

Dio turns at that, though he does not release his hold.

"No." He finally says.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Jonathan offers. Did Dio have as heartfelt a friend as Speedwagon? Maybe in Pryce, or Kensington, or possibly one of his coworkers.

"No," his cousin repeats, though there is a curtness in his tone.

Undaunted, or perhaps simply stupid, Jonathan had pressed on.

"But something's wrong."

If Dio's arm were around his neck, it would have surely become a chokehold. As it is, Jonathan only feels his shoulders squeezed uncomfortably close. As sudden as the reaction started, it stops,
and his cousin's breaths even out again.

"Now why would you say that?" he asks. Perhaps if Jonathan hadn't known him for practically half his life (and all their adult lives), he would have been fooled. But he has and the false bravado in the other man's tone is as clear as day. "Nothing's wrong. Go to sleep, Jojo."

- 

He makes an embarrassing attempt at turning the tables the next night. Dio, after confirming that he could be aroused again, is sucking him off in the parlor. Even after months of practice, the other is still, without question, better.

It's in the details, Jonathan thinks, eyes lidding from pleasure, like how well Dio could control his gag reflex, or how whenever Jonathan opened his eyes, Dio would be looking right at him; how he openly derived pleasure from the activity and how his tongue would continue laving, even as Jonathan was worn out, fingers buried deep in blond locks and spine stretched taut, until Jonathan had caught his breath, really.

Was this how he had made Dio feel in the beginning of their relationship, he wonders, when his cousin rises to his feet to spit in the sink and Jonathan sees the other is still not at all aroused. Did Dio feel unwanted, unneeded, like an item to be maintained rather than loved?

He tries to be gentle, really. But, struck with the need to hear his name muttered like a prayer, some part of him is overcome with lust.

The kiss is gentle.

"I love you."

The words are too.

His fingers fumble undoing Dio's belt and while his touch is not heavy, it is not light either. There is an insistence to his actions that leaves little regard for his cousin. His cousin, who is pressed against the door to his own bedroom.

It takes so long to arouse Dio, even when he is trailing kisses down his neck and jawbone, that he needs to lick his hand halfway. It is persistence alone that earns him that first twitch, and tenacity bordering on brashness that allows him to coax Dio to climax.

Rather than the usual sigh of contentment or pleased hum, Dio looks physically pained, even as the tremors of pleasure are working through him. He very nearly collapses; probably would have if Jonathan were not propping him up, and Jonathan feels his own stomach sink. Like an out-of-body experience, he watches himself shouldering the other man and dragging him to his own bed.

Frantically, he searches his cousin's face for rhyme or reason.

"Dio," he tries again, "What's wrong?"

The smile he gets in return is so fake, Jonathan thinks he might cry.

"You're always worrying unnecessarily," his cousin chides.

They sleep in separate beds that night.

-
"I've decided," Jonathan declares the next morning.

"Oh?"

"I'll wait for you."

"Wait for what?"

"I don't know. But something is clearly troubling you -- "

"No, Jojo," Dio rolls his eyes, "Nothing is troubling me."

"No, something is. And I won't press you to tell me because we all have our secrets, but -- "

"You're being ridiculous."

"Last night, when I -- " Jonathan falters, " -- touched you. You looked like you would cry."

"You were imagining things," his cousin rolls his eyes again. "Why not try again tonight? I promise I'll be more responsive."

"So I can really make you cry?"

"Why not?" Dio counters, "I'm sure I would enjoy it."

"Dio, don't take me for a fool," Jonathan retorts, ignoring the bait, "I may not know what happened, but I know you. Something's upset you."

"No Jojo," Dio snarls, thoroughly riled, "I'm not."

Dio leaves without a kiss goodbye and they sleep in separate rooms again. Come Friday and they try again. Jonathan finishes, and this time Dio does really cry. It's only a couple of tears and he doesn't even blow his nose, but it is proof enough that something is wrong.

"I love you," Jonathan repeats at the dining table the next day, "And I will wait for you, however long this takes."

Dio is thoroughly disgruntled with his declaration.

"I am not," he spits, "Some maiden to be wooed."

"No," Jonathan agrees, "But you are not bound to -- to my pleasures of flesh."

"Jojo," the smile Dio gives is sickening, "I revel in pleasures of your flesh."

"No," Jonathan says, kissing both his cheeks, "You are lying and I wish you'd tell me why. But I love you and believe in you, so I'll wait." And with that said, he dashes off to the library.

- 

Everything is the woman's fault, of this, Dio is certain. After two godawful months of sleeping alone -- of tossing and turning and being utterly impotent at not-yet twenty-two years of age because all he could see whenever he so much as closed his eyes was that godforsaken star-shaped birthmark that was a permanent reminder of Jonathan's infidelity -- he is certain of this: she must be gotten rid of.
The state of things as they are, he's made his antipathy towards the woman clear so any accidental
death, no matter how innocuous, would raise eyebrows, at the least. On top of that, Jonathan has
thrown himself into investments and accounts with a passion and will not shut up about how much
a difference being able to use twenty percent of the ports at Southampton are with regards to
international trade. His cousin is trying to protect the woman, in his own softhearted and obvious
(but nonetheless loathsome) manner, and Dio hates her all the more for it.

After one month without contact, his plan is thus: he will not see her again, ever. And neither will
Jonathan. He will wait until November, when the annulment clause of the marriage would kick in.
Her father would take her back and her dowry would be summarily returned and everyone would
be able to wipe their hands of the ordeal. As soon as she is gone, Dio is certain, everything will
return to normal. He can try again with a prostitute, if Jonathan was really so desperate for a child,
or perhaps some baronet's bastard daughter -- someone of a lower rank, who wouldn't be welcomed
into high society with open arms.

Leave it to Jonathan to dash his plans two months in with a surprise visit to the manor.

"I'll be gone for the weekend," his cousin announces in the middle of July.

"Oh?" Dio asks, not looking past the papers, "Where to?"

"Home."

"No you aren't," he says, still not lowering the news.

"It's been two months without any contact," Jonathan snaps, "Do you plan to leave her there until
Christmas?"

"No," Dio can honestly say. "I'm not."

Jonathan mutters something under his breath but leaves it at that. They're both on edge for different
reasons and he, like usual, bows out.

But Dio refuses to give him an easy way out.

"Jojo. You're not going."

"Yes. I am."

"No," he folds the paper and sets it aside, full-on glaring at this point, "You are not."

"Yes I am."

"No you are not you meddling child -- "

"Yes I -- "

"She is not your wife, is she?!"

"Then take better care of her!"

"Who are you, her father?"

"I am her brother-in-law," Jonathan sets his jaw and Dio wants very much to break it, "And though
you may not have married her for love, it is still a covenant before God and if I can offer any
assistance -- "
"YOU WILL NOT."

Instead of continuing, Jonathan slams the door.

-

The carriage ride to the manor consists of them seated on opposite ends, arms stubbornly folded, with Jonathan refusing to look his way.

Dio fills the silence with demands.

You will not, you will not, you will not -- , he lists.

At a certain point, Jonathan plugs his ears and then falls asleep.

-

In the two months since her arrival, Constance has deftly and surely transformed the inside of the manor. When Jonathan steps in, it is as if the house he grew up in had been given a second life. Houseplants are now scattered everywhere and birdsong echoes throughout the ground floor. The patio now has a grand piano, a harp, and a flute and the upholstery in the sitting rooms has been replaced with a double-layer, a sheer primary and a silken secondary.

"Viscount, Baron," the new lady of the manor greets, descending from the stairs. Her fiery hair, no longer covered, flows behind like a blazing halo. Jonathan rushes to bid her hello, taking her hand and kissing it, and in that moment, Dio could vomit.

How wonderful and eager he feels in those couple seconds, to know that she will soon be ousted!

-

Constance does not react as expected to his declaration.

"Oh," she says, entirely indifferent, "I have no need for that anymore. I am with child, you see."

His perception of the world slows before grinding to a halt.

His eyes narrow in on her entirely snappable neck.

"You're lying," he rasps.

"Am I?" she counters, raising an eyebrow. "For I have not been with anyone since."

He calls her a number of vile names then and proceeds to threaten her with every form of torture he knows. She takes his hand and places it over her stomach.

"This is your brother's child," she says, daring him, "Would you murder it?"

He recoils as if burned and refuses to speak to her. He forbids her from attending dinner and up-and-leaves when she ignores him and sits down at the table anyways.

She has made a fool of him, this woman who has been elevated to his equal in this house of sixty-six rooms and Jonathan. For a horrible sinking moment, he wonders what would happen if she spoke. If she said that he had forced her to bed Jonathan and that the child she carried was actually her brother-in-law's. No one would believe her of course, least of all Jonathan, and Dio makes sure to tell her so.
"This is not what I was promised," Constance says. Despite the tears, her voice is steady.

He is in the wrong, he knows. But all he can think of is Jonathan -- his Jonathan -- buried deep in her cunt. That there is a part of Jonathan, something Dio cannot hope to touch, that has been touched by this woman, this harlot, this harpy, this invader to the manor, and when he sees her crying all he can think of is how easily Jonathan would sway to her side, even without knowing the truth of the matter!

"I don't care," he replies, keeping his voice just as steady. But as she does not stop crying, his features twist themselves and he reveals his true feelings: "Do you think my brother will believe you? He's never spared you a second glance, he'd think you were mad!"

She opens her mouth and then closes it when he crosses the distance to tower over her. His wife (he hates the word, hates it, and cannot and will never consider this whore to be his) stares back, just as angry though never quite mad.

Jonathan pays his sister-in-law a second visit in late July after her only friend in the manor, one of the maids, has run off with half of her trousseau. She is mourning the loss of companionship more than the loss of jewelry and she looks to the window when he sets the tray down at her bedside.

"Sister," he addresses, ignoring Dio's rantings and ravings. (She is not your sister, she is not family, do not speak of her as such. You are family. We are family. She is an intruder we are unwillingly housing or have you forgotten the things her father demanded of you? -- Jojo, do not pick up that tray!)

She turns to face him, expression ashen, and the condolences lodge in his throat.

"Please eat," he urges, setting the tray down on her lap, "For your child, if not for yourself."

(Do not touch her, Dio had screamed, when Jonathan had kissed his cousin's brow and before Jonathan had locked him in their once-shared room. If you touch her, he threatened, I will shear her bald and throw her out into the streets, agreement with the Earl be damned!)

"Thank you," his sister-in-law says, setting the spoon next to the empty bowl.

"If you would prefer it," Jonathan carefully begins, putting the tray to the side, "I could arrange for your return home."

"I would not," she says, shaking her head. "Viscount, you are lucky to have your brother. When he is by your side, you are home. I may be unhappy here, but I was miserable with Father."

"The convent then," he tries. "I could arrange for your return there."

"The convent?" she smiles, thinking back to then, "Yes... I was happy then. But they will not allow my return for I have been -- tainted."

"It was not by your choice," Jonathan insists, "If you told them the truth of the matter..."

"Viscount," she turns to the window, pressing a hand to her unswollen stomach, "Do you believe your brother violated me?"

The shock sends him reeling back. Distantly, he hears the crash of the tray.
"I'm sorry," he says, covering his mouth. "I -- I'll call for a maid." He staggers out and can vaguely recall asking for a servant to clean his mess up. He knocks his elbow against the bannister in his haste to round the corner and when he tries the door to their bedroom, he finds it already unlocked.

Dio scowls at him when he enters but Jonathan pays him no heed, running to the washroom and promptly throwing up. He heaves until his stomach hurts, until he falls to his knees and has to breathe from his mouth, until Dio comes to his side and forcibly pulls him to his feet, thrusting a glass of water into his hand.

"Dio," he sets the glass down, trying to quell the nausea, "What happened on your wedding night?"

He's asked this question a dozen times and received a dozen non-answers in response.

"We did the deed and showed her father the bloodied sheets," Dio recites, though he looks ill-at-ease.

"Did she struggle?" Jonathan demands. "Or beg for you to stop?"

"No," Dio says. It is the truth. She had taken a sleeping draught before making herself blind and deaf, laying a sheet over her naked body. She had neither struggled nor screamed when, as arranged, Dio carried her to the room Jonathan was in. "She did not."

"She is the mother of your child," Jonathan hisses, an urgency in his voice.

"I have no need for a child," he spits and there is a fire in his eyes that Jonathan cannot understand.
Harken, harken, with a happy heart!

Come the middle of August and nothing has been resolved. Jonathan visits the manor every weekend and Dio sorts out enough free time to follow along though Jonathan is as proper as ever. Does his cousin think Dio is being done a favor? Forcing husband and wife to spend two dinners each week in absolute silence? When he sees Jonathan smiling over his slice of steak, he realizes that he's the only one out of the three of them to know both parents. Neither Jonathan nor Constance had seen their mother and Constance seemed to have grown up underneath the cloth. Did they consider these sort of suppertime normal?

He doesn't get the chance to ask as Monday rolls by and they return to the Fitzroy Flat. His plans of paying some scoundrel to kill the woman off and then killing said scoundrel in a fit of passion are also interrupted when he receives a most unnerving telegram from Wilcox on Wednesday.

"Keep an eye on your cousin," Dio reads, "And I'll see you in Spain." He looks at the Countess who had delivered the message, "Was there anything else?"

"Just that, Baron."

"I see." Dio folds the paper and slips it into his pocket, "Well, thank you very much, Lady Fitzroy."

After the landlady returns to the ground floor, Dio puzzles over the telegram. Clearly Wilcox and Jonathan (and probably Webb) were in communication. Was it regarding Constance? But then why would Wilcox ask him to keep an eye on Jonathan!

This is how bad things have gotten between them: when the clock strikes eight in the evening and Jonathan has not come back and Dio realizes, belatedly, that he had been taking extra hours at the firm which meant arriving early and leaving late and translated in turn to their schedules never quite matching. He had seen Jonathan Sunday evening, when they had returned from the manor, but after that...?

That it was Wednesday and Speedwagon had not come calling should have been clue enough!

- "Mr. Brando!" Speedwagon exclaims, "What are you doing up -- and at this hour?!"

"I was wondering if you knew the whereabouts of my cousin." Even when loitering around Ogre Street at half-past-ten, Dio looks at ease.

"Mr. Joestar?" Speedwagon's brows furrow, "I thought for sure he was with you." He turns back to check the clock, "He'll be halfway to Southampton by now."

"Southampton?"

"Mm. To catch a ferry for Spain."

"Spain!" Dio is out the door and hurrying back to the carriage, safely parked five blocks over.

"Mr. Brando!" Speedwagon calls, grabbing onto his shoulder.

"What?"
"Even if it's not your fault it doesn't hurt to apologize," the older man says in one breath. And then, when it looks like Dio will not hit him, he quickly adds: "Mr. Joestar is most out of sorts over your row. I hope you two can make up soon."

Before Dio can comprehend the implications of his cousin's friend-and-not-accountant's advice, Speedwagon smacks him on the back and beats a fast retreat to the tenements.

"Where to now, sir?" the still-nervous driver asks.

"The train station if you will." Dio gives the man a couple shillings, "And hurry."

As it turns out, his rushed journey from the flat to Whitechapel and then from the train station to Southampton had been entirely unnecessary as the public ferry from Southampton to Bilbao would next depart on Friday. This leaves him the rest of Thursday at least to find Jonathan, and hopefully wring an explanation out of the spoiled brat's neck.

"Son-in-law!" the Earl joyously greets, rising to embrace him, "I knew the stars had aligned when I met you!" Conspiratorically, the much-older man swings an arm over Dio's shoulder, "From the point of view of the expecting father, tell me, what're your feelings that the child will be a boy?"

"Couldn't say," Dio replies, trying his best to maintain composure. "I'm afraid this isn't a courtesy call, Earl, I've actually been looking for my cousin."

"Your cousin?" The Earl releases him, harrumphing, "No, I haven't seen him. Weren't you both in London?"

"Yes. There's been a..." he pauses, "A mix-up of sorts."

"Well I haven't seen him. Make sure to come to dinner if you're still in the harbor tonight!"

Thankfully, the Earl lets him leave with little protest, leaving Dio free to wander the streets of the port city.

After he's asked the only recognizable hotel for anyone resembling Jonathan (and while he is trying to work out what his cousin would need to go to Spain for), he catches wind of a familiar set of voices.

" -- will be here any minute."

" -- really not your fault."

"We do -- "

" -- no good, isn't it?"

Sure enough, there is Jonathan, seated at a café table with Webb and Wilcox.

Were he the sort to do it, he would have walked over with a strangler's cord.

"Jojo," he evenly calls.

Jonathan freezes in his seat, wide eyes reminiscent of game, stock-still from terror. Then he tosses down his napkin and takes off running.

Instead of immediately giving chase, Dio turns to Webb and Wilcox, crossing his arms and glaring.
"Don't glare at us," Webb disclaims.

"I sent you that telegram!" Wilcox adds.

"Look, shouldn't you be chasing after Joestar? He clearly wants you to."

Dio shoots one more glare before taking their advice.

Left in the shade of the café's canopy, Webb and Wilcox wait for the second round of iced teas to arrive. As Jonathan is no longer seated, they are left with the dilemma of an extra drink.

"Think he'll catch him?" Wilcox asks, fingers inching towards the third glass.

"I'd bet on it," Webb replies, smacking his friend's hand away.

"How about this iced tea?"

"It'd melt before we found out."

"Not if Brando's as fast as he looks."

Despite being twenty-three and twenty-four years old respectively, they burst into laughter.

"A crumpet says we'll have to bail them out," Webb adds.

"For public indecency?" Wilcox tries and fails to maturely raise an eyebrow.

"And gross sexual misconduct."

"You are an idiot," Dio hisses on the other side of the jail cell. The police at Southampton were kind enough to provide cooling packs for their various cuts and bruises at least.

"Well if you weren't screaming at me in the middle of the street, maybe I wouldn't have hit you." Jonathan retorts. But glaring hurts the still-coagulating wound above his eyebrow and frowning hurts the bruise on his jaw so he settles for looking the other way and maintaining a neutral expression.

"Then I would have hit you."

"What for?!"

"For being an idiot! What the hell are you doing in Southampton? And with Webb and Wilcox? I find it hard to believe all three of you spontaneously decided on a vacation to Spain!"

Upon returning to the whole point behind their public bout of fisticuffs which had only ended with police involvement and after Viscount and Baron had beaten each other black and blue, Jonathan sobers up fast.

Chained on the other side of the cell (for without the handcuffs, they had just gone at it again), Dio cannot see his cousin's expression. The tilt of the shadows does not help; all he can see is Jonathan lowering his head.

As he's sore and frustrated at how Jonathan was not acting according to role, Dio not press the issue, choosing instead to stew over how impossible Jojo could be when he set his mind to things.
Catching up to him in the dead summer heat while wearing a damn three-piece suit had been effort enough, but then when he hadn't even bothered explaining himself -- when he was prepared to walk back to the café by all accounts! And then he had clocked Dio in the face (which was why he was also sporting a black eye) and, well, they had gotten so caught up in the fight, he had forgotten his questions entirely.

"I suppose I owe you a crumpet, Mister Webb," Wilcox concedes when the two of them are ushered into the prison.

"I shall expect it within twenty-four hours, Mister Wilcox," Webb primly replies. He drops a handful of coinage in the guard's outstretched hand.

"Webb! Wilcox!" Jonathan, of course, enthuses.

"I thought for sure you'd be covered in -- " Wilcox snarks, only for Webb to cover his mouth. He rolls his eyes but keeps quiet as the grumbling jailer undoes the two pairs of handcuffs.

"And stay out of trouble, you hear!" the constable hollers before throwing the four of them out.

"Covered in what?" Jonathan asks, after they've left the doctor's office.

"Mosquito bites," Wilcox replies.

"...Are there that many here?"

- 

After a night spent in the hotel lobby getting raucously and incoherently drunk, the four of them depart from Southampton on Friday morning. As Wilcox would explain later, the Berenice was being used by his wife and her friends, which was why they were stuck with the commoner's transit.

"Dio," Jonathan starts, when they are lying on two separate beds in a not-commoner's room, "Dio, are you awake?"

Still irritated and now hung-over to boot, Dio pretends to be asleep.

Concerned with his own wants and subsequently undeterred as usual, Jonathan gets up and leans over, shaking his shoulder.

"Dio, wake up."

His head is killing him and he is certain he would have killed anyone else by now. Multiple times over, even. Dio closes his eyes tight and grabs at the pillow, hoping Jonathan would take a hint.

Jonathan does not get the hint, pulling the pillow away.

"What is it?" Dio snarls. His eyes look bloodshot in the afternoon light.

"I need you to hit me," Jonathan says with all seriousness.

"I already did. Why do you think we ended up in jail."

"No, again. Harder."

"No."
"Please."

This is the problem with Jonathan. He's so communicative, except when he's not. And so predictable, except when he's not. And able to keep walking after being tackled by four full-grown men except with a careless backhand reduces him to tears.

"Elizabeth is dead," Jonathan cries out. "We're going to her funeral now."

And Dio should care, because Jonathan is crying if nothing else. But he is tired and hungover and his head hurts like hell and even Jojo is becoming an eyesore at points and he's so caught up in killing his wife (and getting away with it) and winning his cousin back (while getting his own stupid memories under control) that he can't. He just doesn't. It's good that she's dead, he thinks, for she was clearly suffering and waiting to be put out of her misery. Much like his own wife.

"I'm sorry," he says, and the sentiment sounds false, even to his ears. "What did she die of? When did you find out?" Why didn't you think to inform me -- this, he does not say.

Consumption; five days ago; I should have died in her stead. He drifts off to sleep with Jonathan sobbing about promises. Broken ones, no doubt.

Jonathan, Dio decides, has somehow inherited his flair for the theatric. There can be no other explanation, for people died all the time, even in the summer, and you would have to be blind to think Cross' wife in good physical (much less mental) condition. How Jonathan could think so after her month-long post-childbirth depression was wonder in itself. If you asked Dio (and no one did), the woman was lucky to have survived childbirth -- Donagan and his sister's mothers certainly hadn't!

But returning to Jonathan and his newly discovered propensity for the theatric:

"I've become the sort of person who Father has warned me against becoming," he says on their second and final night aboard the ferry. "A Marley or Scrooge."

"Have you told Webb or Wilcox this?" Just because he was free of the hangover didn't mean he wanted to listen.

"For three months," Jonathan continues, as if Dio had not spoken, "I immersed myself in numbers. In the end tallies and net totals and gross profits and -- and for what? I promised Cross I would take care of her -- "

"Which you did."

"All the money in the world will not bring her back." It's the sort of declaration that should be roared. Shouted, at least. Jonathan whispers it instead, concluding the declaration with a loser's laugh.

"She was a married woman and the wife of your friend," Dio reasons, "As it was, most would say you spent too much time with her."

"She needn't have died."

"If it was consumption, it was only a matter of time. Companionship would not have cured it."

"She was twenty-seven years old!"
"You forget your place, Jojo," Dio chastises.

Jonathan is temporarily silenced at least. And then he opens his mouth again.

"The girl has not been Christened yet."

"Where is she?"

"Back in London. I -- I'll speak with her relatives after."

"What are Webb and Wilcox doing here?"

"To pay their respects of course." And then, when Dio looks unconvinced he adds, "Well, they were worried what I might do. If I went alone."

"You were planning on going alone?!"

"It was my responsibility."

"If her family members know you're the one managing Cross' accounts..."

"Oh, they already know. I'm actually meeting... a cousin of Cross'. Third or fourth, I think. He's to inherit the title after... well, after."

- 

"Five-point-eight percent," Jonathan whispers at a later time.

"Stop thinking about it," Dio commands.

"Don't you think I've tried? Even when I close my eyes, numbers are all I see. I can't stop calculating Dio."

"Jojo," he covers his cousin's eyes, "Stop."

"Fifteen thousand pounds in three months and for what!"

"For the child," Dio snaps, "Just because his wife is dead does not mean your efforts were wasted. Think of his daughter. This will become her inheritance."

Jonathan takes a slow and shuddering breath.

"Yes," he agrees, finally closing his eyes. "Yes, you're right Dio. I did not -- not for myself -- we'll need to arrange everything for his daughter. Yes."

- 

They end up having to fight tooth and nail for Jonathan to retain control over Cross' estate. Their schoolfriend's third cousin once removed is easily twice their age with an adolescent son and daughter, and he considers the circumstances -- despite only holding the rank of knight! -- wholly unremarkable. He will inherit the title and the estate, being the eldest and closest male heir, and he would adopt Cross' daughter and raise her as his own (nevermind that he had his own daughter or that she was fifteen years older than the child or that he was on his third wife already).
When Jonathan will not budge and Webb and Wilcox come to his aid, the good Sir threatens a lawsuit. Dio steps up and reveals his affiliation with Coward Chance and that part of the debacle at least, is settled.

"I can't believe it," Jonathan says, when they're sailing back to England (Webb and Wilcox have departed for business on the continent; apparently Webb's fiancée wishes for a Parisien wedding while Wilcox is to meet his wife in Normandy), "It's bad enough that he's taking her father's title -- and Cross isn't even legally dead yet! -- but to want the estate on top of that?!

"Think of the legal squabbles people will go through for patches of dirt," Dio replies, "And consider yourself lucky."

"He's never even met Cross! And he's certainly never visited the Viscountess!"

"To know that even Jonathan Joestar is capable of disgust," Dio muses.

"I was plenty disgusted with the Ripper."

"But a fellow nobleman?"

"Father was right," Jonathan concludes, "Our souls are what they are irrespective of our deeds and titles!"

After rubbing the sleep from his eyes Jonathan says: "I will go fetch Cross' daughter. You mustn't try to stop me."

"Do as you please," Dio only says.

While in Spain, someone had tried to poison them. Well, mainly Jonathan. He had caught the would-be murderer in the act of course, and in exchange for his silence, had blackmailed a lethal dose of poison out of the extended relation. It was not colorless, unlike the two-part oriental drug, but the man had claimed it would have a sweet taste. The best method of ingestion was through black tea. Earl Grey, if it was available, as the bergamot made the poison undetectable.

Retrieving the four and a half month old baby is not another battle, thankfully. The parlor maid who had overseen the Viscountess has been transferred back to the Isle of Wight and the nursemaid has been replaced with formula. The Viscountess' London family seems eager to be rid of the child; when all is said and done, there was little a not-yet-dead man's infant daughter could do.

The girl-child is quiet, at least. For the first two hours. And then she is bawling without end and the whole cart begins to smell.

"Have you ever changed a nappy before?" the carriage driver chuckles after Jonathan has called for a premature rest stop.

"No," Jonathan says, nose pinched tight. "Never."

"Well any father worth their salt had better learn!" The driver secures the safety pin and hands the now-giggling and gurgling infant back to Jonathan, who marvels at the change in countenance.

"It's so easy to make her happy," he declares, stroking the baby's soft dark curls. She squeals and grabs at his finger.

"Will you have the driver stop her tears every time?" Dio asks.
"Well, if he knows how..."

Dio's ambivalence towards the child (and children in general) morphs into measured dislike when, over the course of the two day carriage ride, it vomits on him three times. His outfit is in mismatched tatters and he cannot scrub the smell from his hair and no matter how hard he tries to ignore Jonathan's laughter, it nonetheless rings through the washroom walls.

They arrive back at the manor after a solid eleven days of nonstop travel (from train to ferry to carriage to ferry to carriage to carriage to carriage) more than moderately disheveled.

And the infant is crying again. The second Jonathan turns, Dio plans to throw it out the window. He has decided children were more trouble than they were worth; progeny was an outdated notion, and really, there were mild-mannered adolescent orphans of every size and shape ready for adoption if Jonathan ever became desperate.

Like a chemical reaction, the meeting of Constance with the infant daughter of her half-brother's cousin ends with elements which did not exist before.

Donagan's sister is like a force of nature, sweeping down the steps despite the slight swell of her stomach. She takes the suddenly-silent child into her arms, pressing kisses to its face, and the baby begins to laugh, grabbing at her almost-aunt's facial features.

Jonathan panics when Constance begins to cry. But while they are not tears of joy, they are not tears of sorrow either.

It is strange, Dio will never forget, how people seem to be drawn together, like the pull of magnets or tides. When the woman he plans to kill meets the child he -- well, also plans to kill -- he sees, in an overlay of her form, an outline of his own mother.

Though it's been years since he's last thought of her, despite the time, her face has not faded.

This, he will never forget. That everything -- from his blood and bones to his words and ideas, from his wishes and wants to his overall understanding of the wider world -- everything he has and is -- is because of her. It was because of her he could read and write and it was because her blood ran through his veins that the Viscount adopted him. His mother had been the reason Jonathan had accepted him as a brother. And if she had lived... he would not have left Whitechapel. Would never consider it, really. And even if his father had been more like Jonathan's, had been capable of conversation or compassion, he would have still held his mother in the highest regard.

He had thought himself all cried out after her death. To think that he could still dredge up some tears -- even after a decade!

This is the woman who would be the mother of Jonathan's child, he understands.

This is the woman he had plotted for months to kill.

As he makes his way up the grand staircase, Kensington's advice echoes between his ears, strangely enough.

"Dio!" Jonathan calls. "Dio, we should really -- "

"I'm tired," he interrupts, turning slightly. "One night at the manor won't hurt Jojo."
And then, for the first time in months, he smiles.

"I had a delusion," Constance confesses, "That I could be a Mary. I mean, after a consummation like such... and with only one coupling at that!"

Dio stays silent, allowing her to say her part.

"It changed when I held her," she says. "I didn't know anything about her, but in that moment, I wanted to make her tears stop. When your cousin... when the Viscount... told me of the circumstances surrounding her parents, my heart went out to her -- the daughter of the man who stole my brother away!"

"And I realized," she continues, swallowing, "That if I could love his child, that I would surely love my own. I ..."

"I do not want to be Mary anymore. I do not want my child born for some higher purpose. I just want them to be happy. To love themselves as unconditionally as we are taught to love them."

"The boon that I ask of you is thus: I want to be a mother. Regardless of the child's gender, I want to have a part in raising them."

Like this, stooped before him with her hands clasped in absolution, the mother of Jonathan's child looks more like Salome than any Madonna.

"Miss Donagan," Dio starts, bemused that neither of them recoil when he touches her shoulder, "Irrespective of paternity, we can be certain you are the child's mother. Even, I, Dio," he affects a haughty tone, as if he had not been asking for forgiveness mere seconds ago!, "Would not think to separate a mother from her child."

He removes his hand so as to allow her to stand. She does so and they observe each other for a while. Finally, she drops into a half-curtsy.

"Then consider your debt repaid."

Before leaving the North wing, he turns and adds: "Oh, and my brother sends his thanks for your redecorating of the manor. The birds, especially."

She smiles, inclining her head.

"My pleasure, Mr. Brando."

"I was scared of losing you," he tells Jonathan, after they've returned to sharing a bed and he has nearly had the life choked out of him with the other man's embrace.

"They say lovers begin to share temperaments after a while," Jonathan replies, tucking back a lock of blond hair, "Which of us do you think started this absurd fear?"

"Is that even a question?" Dio snorts.

"I wasn't the one who got married!"

"But you were planning to."
"And now there's no need."

"I wasn't the one who thought the world was ending at age twelve."

"I was fourteen!"

"A world of difference, I'm sure."

"The world could still be ending for all we know," Jonathan sniffs, "Perhaps your child will be able to see it."

"About that," Dio clears his throat, fingertips tracing Jonathan's spine. "Do you remember what you said after Windknights?"

"How the Ripper made a noise like -- " Dio hits him then, "Okay, okay!" Jonathan says while laughing. "About giving up the Ripple, you mean?"

"No. About how everything we have ought to be shared."

"Oh. Yes." Jonathan tugs at his necklace, "Of course."

"Well," he takes a breath, "I'd like to share the child with you. For it seems you've got more plans for it than me." In response to his proposition, Jonathan laughs.

"Don't be ridiculous Dio," he somehow manages to kiss him full on the lips in the dark, "I would never think to be his father!"

"You should and you will," Dio insists, "For all that is mine is yours."

"Easy for you to say now," the other man teases, "But just wait 'till the child is born. Then you'll be changing your tune."

The girl is at last christened on the last Sunday of the month. Elizabeth Clarice Cross gets a godfather in Jonathan Joestar while Dio and Constance are given the role of uncle and aunt.

With the official naming of the baby girl (though she responded best to her nickname of "Lisa Lisa"), conversation commences on the not-yet-born babe. It is a short conversation following a very hearty dinner.

"I'll be teaching them theology," Constance shrugs, as if that were her only concern.

Jonathan opens his mouth, but Dio beats him to the chase.

"Georgiana if it's a girl, George if it's a boy, Speedwagon as the godfather, and a Great Dane of their own when they turn eight." He grins. "Did I get everything?"

"Just about," Jonathan huffs, chucking his napkin. "But don't do things how I'd do them! This is your son-or-daughter we're talking about!" He whirls on his sister-in-law, looking for support, "Sister, surely you've some thoughts on the name?"

"Hmm... I'm partial to Georgiana myself."
"It is the feminine of the old Viscount."

"Oh, that is quite touching."

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Speedwagon says yes. Of course he does. He cries too, though Dio isn't there to see it.

-

Although the scandal at Cleveland Street begins to unravel in the middle of July, it is only late September that the press gets wind of it. The trembles in high society become outright tremors as everyone is left wondering who will be outed next.

"What do you have to be nervous of?" he scoffs, when Jonathan confesses to anxieties.

"You said that no one was ever prosecuted for this..."

"So long as they're discreet," he appends. This is while his hand is sliding up Jonathan's bare thigh. "Which we are."

"The pinnacle of," Jonathan adds, rolling his eyes.

"Of course."

Which is why it's ridiculous when, come the second of October, Dio is called to the main entrance only to be greeted by two nervous corporals.

"Corporals Pickering and South," the taller man stammers, doffing his hat. "Lord Baron, could we trouble you to come by the station?"

He agrees to accompany the two constables there, where he is led into a questioning room and seated across from the adolescent youth from six months prior.

"Lord Joestar," Corporal South begins, "Have you ever seen this boy?"

"No."

"But it's him, honest," the boy insists, "He took me to this den in Whitechapel and had me -- "

"Quiet boy," the corporal snaps. "Lord Joestar, are you sure you've never seen him?"

"No," he repeats, frowning, "Who is he? And why would I take him to Whitechapel?"

"Sir!" the boy tries, "You must remember, you must! It was... it was the twenty-eighth of April! You told me I wasn't being paid for conversation!"

Dio takes out his diary and leafs through it. "On the twenty-eighth of April, after I went to church with my brother, I paid my then-fiancée a visit," he intones.

"Then-fiancée?" the corporal raises an eyebrow.

"We've since married."

"Oh." he pulls on the brim of his hat, "I see."

"Lord Baron," Corporal Pickering clears his throat, "I'm afraid it's not so cut-and-dry. The boy has
witnesses you see. In both Fitzrovia and Whitechapel."

"What, exactly, am I being accused of?" Dio demands.

"Nothing, really," both corporals quickly insist, "But this boy here was found with twelve shillings. He said that, rather than having earned it via pickpocketing, you paid him that -- and more! -- in late April."

"This is ridiculous," Dio snorts, "I've never seen him in my life."

"But the witnesses -- "

He stands up, easily towering over the other three, "Are you accusing me of indecency."

"N-nothing of the sort, Lord Baron! It's just that, well, there are witnesses and...

"I shall take my leave then," Dio declares, fully prepared to do so.

"You shall do no such thing," a familiar voice snaps.

"Ah," Dio smiles, "Constable Reading. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"This is an investigation and you, my newly-made Baron, are under investigation."

"Do you have a warrant," Dio snaps.

"No, but we do have the press. The constable's smile is cruel. Did he suspect Dio of forcing Jonathan to make him inherit? Was he simply taking his frustrations out on a familiar noble? "Come, Lord Joestar. If you were innocent, would you object to some questions?"

"I would object to my time being wasted."

"You are free to leave." To demonstrate, he opens the door.

Dio curses under his breath and then sits back down.

"My brother," he demands, "Send for him, will you?"

Jonathan dashes into the interrogation room and loudly demands his release. At this point, five eyewitnesses have consistently picked Dio out from five other men and the Whitechapel prostitute and Frederick have been brought in for questioning.

Despite his distaste for the whole affair, Dio has kept up with the papers. The public is out for blood: they want to believe homosexuality is a disease originating from the upper classes and contaminating the normal-yet-underprivileged youth. More than that however, there is a call for justice amongst the coppers following the Ripper debacle.

Unwilling to touch Jonathan, especially before the constable and corporal, he nonetheless manages a reassuring smile. He, Dio, has no intention of becoming a scapegoat.

"Jojo," he says, "Call Constance."

Jonathan nods, reaching across the table to touch at his shoulder, and then runs off again.
Due to the consistency of the witness reports, the constable is able to obtain an arrest warrant. He is subsequently held in a cell (albeit reserved for nobility) for five days and four nights.

"What," Constance demands on the sixth day, "Is my husband doing behind bars?"

Despite only reaching the constable's chin and being five months pregnant, Donagan's sister sweeps in and shamelessly pulls rank. I am the daughter of an Earl, the wife of a Baron, and a woman originally consecrated to the Church, and my witnessing is worth twenty commoners. That she truly believes the justness of her cause is of great importance.

"That was amazing," Jonathan says, when he's helping her back into the carriage.

"I cannot believe the nerve of London policemen," Constance sniffs, "To accuse you of paying off a prostitute!"

"As I said, I've never seen the boy in my life." Dio takes her hand and kisses it. "Still, without you, who knows how long they would have kept me."

"Your name is in the papers now," Jonathan winces.

"A correction will be issued, I'm sure."

"Thank you," Jonathan repeats, "Thank you, really."

He turns to Dio after the carriage as left and remarks as they're walking back to the flat, "You married a good woman."

"As if either of us chose her," Dio snorts.

- When the papers issue a correction that the warrant for his arrest had been placed without corroborating the witness recounts and further declares the youth to have been found guilty of theft and perjury, Dio thinks the whole affair will be put to rest. But then their landlord himself, Lord Fitzroy, Earl of Euston, is asking to speak with him. The man gives him a carte blanche with the order to "run that slanderous publication into the ground". Apparently the Earl had been accused of frequently 19 Cleveland Street on even more contentious grounds. He has been happily married for eighteen years despite the lack of children, and he will not have his wife and family name dragged through the mud without retribution.

Dio returns the cheque uncashed and takes the case free of charge. He goes on to win the Earl's case while acting as the primary representative of Coward Chance and is heartily congratulated by both firm and landlord. As for the slanderous publication, well... he takes special pleasure in demanding reparations too large for the obscure gazette to pay.

- "Well," Wilcox says, dabbing at his forehead, "It's settled."

"Is it?" Webb asks.

"Yes, it is." He turns to Dio, "Brando, I expect your wife will give you a son. Webb, you too. Joestar..." he shakes his head, "You're a lost cause and that's alright. Friendship ought to withstand these sort of things."
"What do you need two sons for?" Dio demands, raising an eyebrow.

"For my two daughters of course."

"Twins?!" Jonathan nearly knocks over his chair in his eagerness to shake Wilcox's hand, "Wilcox! Congratulations!"

"I've decided to take up smoking," the newly-made father announces.

"Your girls will be waiting for a while," Webb warns.

"Oh that's fine," Wilcox shrugs. "I'm sure Brando's child will keep them busy."

"They could always play with Lisa Lisa," Jonathan offers.

"Cross' daughter -- I almost forgot!" Wilcox winces, "Alright Brando, I don't need your son. If you have one, marry him off to the girl. Perhaps Cross and Donagan will still their grave-turning then."

"I guess this means I'll need two sons?" Webb groans.

"Well the girls are in need of husbands," Wilcox tuts.

"Isn't this all too early?" Jonathan reasonably asks.

Webb and Wilcox point and laugh. Dio, at least, is similarly out of the loop.


"Don't you know -- "

"The only thing better than being a parent --

"Is being a grandparent!"

"None of the education -- "

"None of the beatings -- "

"And the brats aren't even brats when you're with them!"

"Just little things to spoil silly!"

The rest of the evening is spent in a matchmaking frenzy that would make even the Marchioness of Lansbury raise her eyebrows.

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Following a late October Parisien wedding, Jonathan has an announcement of his own to make. That it does not concern himself is irrelevant.

"What?" Dio says.

"What?" Jonathan repeats.

"That's a terrible idea."

"No it's not! Think about it -- we'll be going back for Christmas and New Year's anyways. By that
point, it'll be two months, if that."

"Jojo," Dio grinds, "I am not quitting my job."

"And I'm not saying you have to! Just that you should take a break!"

"A five year long break?!"

"You're about to be a father!"

"Jojo. No. This is ridiculous and I will in no way consider it." He had just gotten his foot into the executive door! Leave it to Jonathan to try to pull the carpet out from underneath his feet!

"But you're about to become a father!" Jonathan places more emphasis on the word, as if repetition alone would change his cousin's mind.

"What do you expect me to do with an infant?"

"Feed it! Dress it! Read to it! Play with it!"

"Is this a dog or a doll."

"You know what I mean," Jonathan hits him upside of the head, "You should be there for them."

"That's what the mother is for," Dio sniffs. "I have no interest in infants."

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But Jonathan whines and wheedles for the rest of the month.

"Why are you so invested in this?" Dio asks after the topic of premature retirement has cropped up yet again. "Not that I mind you considering the child to be your own."

"Well," Jonathan tries to look abashed here, "It would look pretty silly otherwise! If you weren't there, I mean."

"I hardly think the woman needs help."

"Not that!" After some hemming and hawing, Jonathan rolls on top of him. "Speedwagon and I are moving back to the manor, you see."

If Dio were drinking something, he would have spat it out. As it is, he chokes on air.

"You what!"

"Well since you've decided he's going to be a godfather! Constance has already agreed to it."

"And when were you planning on informing me of this?"

"It was supposed to be a birthday surprise."

"It's not even December!"

Already, Dio is mourning the loss of firm life.
"Yes," he says, over Sunday roast on the first of the month.

"Yes...?"

"To a hiatus. But only for a year or two!"

When Jonathan tackles him to the floor, Dio tastes wine and gravy.

-  

They bid farewell to the Fitzroy flat a second time after another extended stay, heaving their trunks and valises into the back of the carriage. Both Earl and Countess come out to see them off as Dio is thanked once more for his legal expertise.

Upon their return, the countryside surrounding the manor is already dusted in snow. Despite being seven months pregnant and needing help with the stairs, Constance is nonetheless there to greet them in the parlor, shimmering and glimmering with Lisa Lisa in her arms.

Speedwagon comes over on Christmas and never gets around to leaving. He's given the Viscount's old room in the West wing, though the ground-floor office soon becomes his domain as well. At some point the expectant godfather lets slip that Jonathan had revealed the nature of their relationship, to which Dio only sighs in exasperation.

George Joestar is born in the first week of February, with the snow halfway melted. In the gentlemen's waiting room (where everyone had taken up smoking and drinking to pass the time), Lord Donagan nearly passes out both mother and child were safe. And then he hears the babe's gender and nearly falls to the floor. In his enthusiasm, Jonathan ends up twirling Dio and Speedwagon squeezes the air out of both of them.

"Congratulations!" Jonathan cheers, raising a third (or thirteenth) toast.

"Hear, hear!" Speedwagon agrees. "Congratulations to the new father!"

"And the new uncle," Dio appends.

"And godfather."

"And grandfather!" the Earl adds, suddenly animated once more.

Later that night, Dio pours the Spanish poison down the drain, washing the container out for good measure. When he slips back into bed, he sees Jonathan watching him with sleepy affection.

"Washing hands," Dio explains, thumbing at Jojo's lower lip.

Jonathan opens his mouth to gently bite down on his thumb.

"I'm so excited," he yawns, burrowing close, "And so happy. So so so happy."

"Mm."

"Dio. Are you happy?"

"Yes," he kisses Jonathan's brow before switching off the lights. "I am."
An Approach of Carrot and Stick
End of Part VI: Bachelorhood (1888-1890)
Funiculì, funiculà, funiculì, funiculà!

Dio had had Plans for his twenty-second birthday that year. Grand plans, even. Jonathan had foiled them of course, even when he'd been trying to go along with them because it had been a part of his birthday gift to Dio after all. It had been perfect, Dio insists, and the only problem had been that it had involved Jonathan. With anyone else it would have worked.

The problem is that it also involved horses. Well, in a figurative sense. And Jonathan, having an affinity for the things, had difficulty mistreating the beasts, even in a figurative sense.

"No," Jonathan corrects when Dio explains his reasoning, "It's difficult to mistreat you because I love you."

Dio would complain of mistreatment then and there but it is difficult to reply (much less whine) after that heady post-coital bliss has been multiplied thrice and he is just as boneless after the act as Jonathan normally is.

How did it begin? Well, with Jonathan blindly saying yes.

"Of course," Jonathan says, looking surprised that Dio had to ask, "It's your birthday so of course I'll do as you say!"

"Exactly as I say?" Dio presses.

"As well as I can follow," Jonathan promises. And Dio is satisfied with that.

He would have liked more time to prepare, but as they had arrived on the twenty-second and spent two days with Christmas decorations and then making sure Speedwagon was settled in and then had Boxing Day festivities at the church, on behalf of Constance, to attend, this left him with four days to acquire the items he needed. A trip to London through the snow was out of the question.

But he manages somehow. Love (or in this case: misplaced hopes) finds a way. After the New Year's Eve celebrations, the two of them return to his bedroom, where Jonathan's eyebrows are raised high at the assortment of supplies Dio has amassed.

Dio thrusts a pre-written sheet into the other man's hands and promptly begins stripping.

"Don't stare," he snaps, "Start reading. I want you to be familiar with your lines."

"This?" Jonathan glances at the first couple lines and blanches, "Dio, what is this?!"

"Things I want to hear you say to me. You are welcome to add your own," he pauses to undo his belt and step out of his pants, "But they'll help set the tone."

"Oh, yes," Jonathan obediently reads, and Dio can hear his flush, "Stir your tail and... Dio!"

"What?"

"Where did you get these lines!"

"Here and there," he shrugs, standing before the mirror to better fasten the harness, "I made some of them up."

Jonathan skims over the script which ran front-to-back and side-to-side.
"...I don't think I'll be able to say all this and make love to you."

"Don't be silly Jojo," he turns around to tie the silky tail in place, "They're only guidelines."

Jonathan is distracted from the excessively licentious monologue (if it could be called that) by his cousin's transformation. He stares in slack-jawed surprise at the bitless bridle, the leather reins and harness, and of course, the snow-white ears and tail.

Dio is the one to ruin things first, Jonathan protests, because it is Dio who pushes him back against the bed. It is Dio who digs all four limbs into the mattress and arches his back like no horse ought to be able to.

"Mmmm," he hums when Jonathan informs him of this fact, "I suppose I'm a special steed then, hm?"

Jonathan laughs, fingers playing with the platinum strand Dio had chosen to keep on. As the bridle had left Dio's lips inaccessible, he kisses his cousin's neck before slipping out from underneath.

Oh how innocent they had both been! How eager to please and be pleased! Dio can remember it as if it were mere minutes ago! Which, to be fair, it was. But that was beside the point.

"What do you want me to do?" Jonathan asks, rolling up his sleeves and grabbing the script again.

"Take that whip there and come here. Then read the lines and hit me."

Jonathan does so. Well, he takes the whip and begins to read from the script, at least.

"Ah, my dear stallion, if your leg were broken you'd be shot. If you were blind you'd be stabled. But as you are only refusing to stud," he pauses for dramatic emphasis, as per Dio's bolded instructions, "You need only be corrected."

Dio gives a wanton moan while raising his backside in preparation for the whipping. Jonathan's voice was truly magnificent.

"Um, Dio," Jonathan interrupts his fantasy.

"What?"

"This looks like a real riding crop."

"It's not," he lies.

"Oh. Alright." The paper is turned as Jonathan sets the whip aside to tug on Dio's hair, "Do you have any idea how much you cost? The papers say even Beauty would have been outbid by you." He moves on to pull on the reins, adding: "It's alright if you've yet to win a crown. Your seed alone will earn you your keep."

At this point, Dio is begging for the strop. Jonathan obliges him, releasing the reins to grab at the crop and hit Dio's backside with it.

Dio knows Jonathan, well enough to know that the other would never use full force to strike him. He's removed the keeper from the crop for this very reason, because he wants it to hurt. Jonathan circumvents this by gripping the damn thing by its thinner end and hitting him -- tapping him, really -- with the handle of the crop.

"Jojo," Dio snarls, "Harder."
"What did I do to earn a horse like you," Jonathan sighs in a definite deviation from script. At Dio's insistence, he taps a little faster but adamantly refuses to use more force or -- heaven forbid -- the end that was actually made for striking.

The crop ends up flying halfway across the room courtesy of his sweat-coated fingers and Dio gives a grunt of disgust, pushing himself off the bed.

"Dio," Jonathan calls from the bed after he's finished giggling and Dio has removed most everything. Just as Dio is about to pull off the tail and ears, Jonathan's tone changes. "Dio," he repeats, and there's a sternness in his voice that makes Dio's cock twitch, "Come here."

"Whose birthday is it," Dio grumbles, though he goes over and allows himself to be pulled into Jonathan's lap.

"Yours of course," Jonathan replies, kissing at his throat. He reaches up to pet at the white ears, surprised when his cousin makes a nicker-like sound.

"I practiced," Dio grates, feeling his cheeks flush.

"You would make a lovely stallion," Jonathan murmurs, running his fingers through blond locks. He rests his chin on Dio's shoulder, playing with the necklace.

"Tell me more," Dio sighs, canting his hips.

"I would not ride you or enter you in the races. If you insisted on living in the stables, then I would sleep on a cot by your side."

It's stupid and sappy and not at all what he wanted but because it's so very Jonathan, Dio begins to harden.

"We would go on walks throughout the countryside. I would braid a meadow's worth of flowers in your mane and tail."

Jonathan's hand inches lower, teasing.

"And I would sooner be whipped than whip you. And let us not speak of bridles or harnesses or saddles!"

"Yes," Dio sighs, when Jonathan ghosts his palm against the inner thigh. "Yes."

"But," Jonathan pauses, grasp a hair short of the prize, "I would never let you be put to stud."

"Dio," his cousin whispers against the shell of his ear. His hand is so close, Dio swears he can feel the heat from Jonathan's palm. "Why is that, do you think?"

Dio grinds his teeth and tosses his head.

"Hmm?" Jonathan presses, hovering.

It is only when Jonathan's fingers return to his thighs that Dio gives in.

"Because," he gasps, "I'm yours." He can feel more than hear Jonathan's appreciative hum for in that moment, his nerves might as well be singed. Jonathan's hand, steadily pumping, is like a balm for his very soul and when he climaxes, he feels himself come apart at the seams.

Jonathan makes him come three times. Once with his hand, a second time with his mouth, and a
third time just rutting. He tosses the tail and ears off the bed; they meet with the script and crop on the floor.

"Why do I bother," Dio asks, after most of his senses have returned.

In lieu of answering his question, Jonathan kisses him and exclaims: "Happy Birthday!"

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Perched on the edge of one of the already-excavated pyramids and looking down at the workers and scholars, Dio thinks he can understand, however minutely, his cousin's fascination with his ancient peoples. For it is only here in this forgotten city with its unpronounceable name that manages to roll off of the native's tongues like the surfeit mists permeate the skies of dawn and dusk, that he can think: there are still things undiscovered.

Jonathan would enjoy this vantage point. Well, he'd probably want to be at the forefront with the workers. But he's gotten mud under his nails for two months and been too excited-come-exhausted for anything else and Dio has had enough.

At some point, the call of his subject had become too strong to ignore. Jonathan had vehemently protested Dio accompanying him as George was not yet three. He had even threatened to stay behind. But between the promise of new discoveries and Constance and Speedwagon's reassurings, the two of them had successfully made their way to the American continent.

His musings are cut short by the arrival of one of the field students. In stilted but comprehensible English (spoken in an accent reminiscent of Cross' long-dead wife), she asks him:

"Doctor Joestar, have you seen him?"

Dio shakes his head.

"No, I haven't."

The student gestures to the clearing workers, "Señor Batres -- to speak with him."

"I see," Dio stands, "Well, I'll go look for him then."

She shakes her head violently, motioning for him to remain seated, and hurries back down the pyramid. He watches her speak with the excavation director, another colonial by the name of Leopoldo Batres. Fifteen years their senior, he is remarkably sprightly for a man approaching forty. From twenty meters away he looks up and waves.

Dio waves in return, watching both archaeologist and student return to their charts. It was not Jonathan's style to wander off on his own. They would have to make up some feasible excuse later.

He sits at his perch for a while longer, observing as four more great stone steps are brought into view. Then he stands up and walks down the pyramid and back to the campsite, citing the need to re-organize records. Unlike Jonathan, he is not a common visitor on-site; they expect him to come and go on a whim.

The close contact is painful at times, especially when he cannot touch. They sleep in separate tents here, and Jonathan will not sit with him at meals. It is a sordid sensation, seeing the sweat drip and the muscles ripple and the man's breaths grow shallow while needing to make do with the most fleeting of encounters. The twelve-hour-long six-day workdays where Sunday is spent in prayer and on clean-up duty are as much of the problem as the overall remoteness of the region.
He enters his own tent and quickly secures the flap, getting to a crouch to admire his ill-gotten afternoon prize.

Despite the dense foliage and the perpetual mist, they've both tanned considerably since the start of excavation season. The tan lines are more apparent on Jonathan, as he has his drawers and little else. Dio has bound him between the center poles, spread thighs and caught wrists, and is even considerate enough to gag him.

He had expected Jonathan would be angry. Disgruntled at least. To see his cousin's eyes dark with arousal, the proof of which was leaking past his drawers, is a welcome surprise to say the least.

"Jojo," he murmurs, reaching behind Jonathan's head to untie the gag, "Won't you play with me for a bit? It's been so long."

When Jonathan lunges forward, kissing him, the whole tent shakes with his movement.

"Careful," Dio laughs, reaching into the other man's pants, "You wouldn't want the pitches to fall, now would you?"

A keening whine escapes Jonathan's lips when Dio palms his erection.

"Dio," he pleads, rolling and rolling his hips, "Dio, please."

"Patience," Dio reminds, kissing him. It is Jonathan who forces his mouth open, twining tongues. With amusement, Dio notes that the other does not seem to mind anymore that they've long since run out of tooth powder. He strokes himself to hardness during the kiss, extracting his other hand to brush against Jonathan's inner thighs. Compared to the bronze shimmer south of his elbows and knees, they might as well be milky white.

Jonathan wants this bad, he realizes, when the other begins to frantically strain against his bindings.

Dio takes his face and presses their foreheads together, hushing.

"Jojo," he soothes, playing with the short hairs on the back of Jonathan's neck, "You should have more faith. Don't I always take of you?"

Though Jonathan strains and struggles for a couple moments more, eventually he gives up, relaxing against the constraints.

"Yes," he mumbles, spreading his legs further.

"Good boy," Dio teases, before unfastening his own shorts and standing up.

Dio fucks into Jonathan's mouth then, spilling in under a minute while thrusting the head of his prick against the other man's throat. He holds Jonathan's head in that position until he's forced to swallow. Afterwards, he slowly lowers his chin and licks the tears from his eyes.

"What a wretched thing I've made you into," he murmurs, delighting in the choked groan Jonathan gives when Dio wraps his fingers about his cock, "Even after that, you're still aroused."

Jonathan comes while leaning entirely against Dio, both of them on the floor of the tent. By the time he's caught his breath, Dio has undone the restraints and thrown a blanket over the two of them.
"I'm sorry," he says, with his palm pressed over Dio's heartbeat. "I should not have brought you here."

"It is not so bad," Dio concedes, "You were certainly less vocal than normal."

Jonathan splutters incoherencies.

"I also liked tying you up," his cousin adds, tugging him up for a kiss.

"How did I even get here?" Jonathan asks.

"I moved you of course."

"In the night?"

"When else?"

"And no one saw?"

"Who would see?" Dio stretches, "I'm sure they were as exhausted as you."

Only Jonathan can laugh over a midnight kidnapping and call him a romantic afterwards. Dio hits him for good measure but ends up massaging his shoulders, arms, legs, ankles, and wrists after the most unsubtle of complaints. They while away the afternoon joking and chatting and when they sneak out of the tent in time for dinner, it is as if they were boys yet again.
It is moments like these that make Dio regret giving up his homicidal habits. The year is 1897 and the four adults are seated in the parlor of the Joestar mansion discussing the children's education. That they were to be educated at home was a given. But as for the subjects, well...

"No," Jonathan says.

"Mm," Constance agrees.

"I don't know," Speedwagon gives the father-of-his-godson some sympathy, "Doesn't it seem sad that he's the only one without a lesson plan?"

"He is my son," Dio snaps, "And I'll be damned if I'm not the one teaching him!"

"No one's saying you won't teach him," Jonathan soothes.

"Actually, we are," Constance interjects.

"Well --"

"Alright, we're saying he has nothing worthwhile for the children to learn," she corrects. Dio glares. Leave it to a woman to harbor a grudge for years. He also regrets his choice in wife. The daughter of a baron would've never dared question his judgement.

"Not at the moment," Speedwagon agrees, nodding sagely.

"Jojo," Dio turns on the other man, "Surely you won't stand for this?"

"Well..."

But the thing is: Jonathan has already won the rights to three subjects.

"Maybe you can give your cousin one of your subjects," Constance suggests.

"But I'm better than him in all of them!"

"Well I'm not giving up theology," she sniffs.

"And there's no chance I'd leave arithmetic to any of you," Speedwagon adds.

The other three had, of course, unanimously decided that the children did not need a legal education, especially before the age of ten. Or before they could competently read or write.

"This is ridiculous," Dio reiterates -- one of the rare moments when he had tried to pull parental rank -- "For I am the boy's father and I should have the final say!"

"Don't wanna," George sniffs, when Dio asks if he would enjoy the honor of a legal education.

"But... what... that..." Dio splutters, fingers twitching.
"Law's boring," the child explains. He promptly runs out of the library.

"Oh Dio," Jonathan sighs, "Don't pout."

"I'm not pouting," Dio insists.

"Here, how about this? You can help out with my lessons."

"No."

"If you say so..." Jonathan squeezes his shoulder and bends down for a kiss. Dio huffs again, turning his head so that Jonathan's lips brushed against his cheek.

Eventually, Lisa Lisa takes pity on her Uncle Dio and consents to sitting through a lecture on legal texts that, surprisingly, does not leave her bored to tears.

"Elizabeth is going to be a lawyer when she grows up," Dio proudly says over dinner that night.

"Not fair," George whines, with the childish certainty that he was getting the short end of the stick somehow, "How come she gets more classes?"

"Because I'm a year older than you," Lisa Lisa haughtily replies.

"Eleven months!"

"That's practically a year!"

"No it's not!"

Needless to say, both children get a headstart on medieval and modern English legal practices. Whether they would go on to use this knowledge in a practical sense was anyone's guess (they wouldn't), but at least Dio got to play teacher.

Zeppeli discovers Lisa Lisa's talent for the Ripple when she is not yet ten years old and it is primarily through Constance's intervention that she is not spirited away altogether. Instead, through a series of terse negotiations (comprised entirely of "you're wasting her potential here!" pitted against "she's not even ten years old and you want her to decide her life?!"), they come to a mutual agreement: Lisa Lisa will spend the summer training with Zeppeli and she could decide how to proceed thereafter. Surprise, surprise, Cross' daughter is a wild child and she gladly consents to more Ripple training.

When George is sent to boarding school at twelve years old, Dio and Jonathan and Speedwagon finally return to London. Wilcox has managed to get a foot through the Eton door and George, being the heir to two titles, is a shoe-in candidate. He ends up (like Elizabeth) more interested in athletics than academics and the mantleplace in the manor is littered with medallions and trophies by the time of his graduation.

Dio is hard-pressed to draw the line from when the boy suddenly became a man, just that the difference was especially striking when he saw Lisa Lisa after an absence of five years. Of course he and Jonathan (along with Constance and Speedwagon) had seen her regularly, but as Zeppeli's training schedule had not matched up with Eton's... well.
The way George looks at her then, seventeen years old and still growing, with his mouth a little open and his mind no doubt blank -- he, Dio, can remember having felt the same. It's difficult, to see children as adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, especially as he can remember when both of them were shrieking, screaming, incessantly-bawling infants, but there they are, standing face-to-face before him, as young and vibrant as the summering countryside itself.

Something paternal surges up then, as he finds himself wanting the boy to have a, well, a less-troublesome romance.

"Are you saying I'm troublesome?" Jonathan demands, tugging at his necklace.

"You don't know the half of it..." Dio grumbles, rolling over so his head was wedged on top of his cousin's shoulder.

"But all's well that ends well."

"Oh, I didn't say you weren't worth it."

They grapple for a while under the sheets, giggling and groping as lovers tend to do.

"Anyways," Dio starts, after he's caught his breath a second time (after nearly two decades of sharing the same bed, Jonathan's refractory period is almost endearing. Almost.), "I just don't think she should be going to Spain so much."

"Who? Lisa Lisa?"

"Of course," he rolls his eyes, "Who else goes to Spain?"

"But it's to see relatives!"

"Constance said one of them might make an offer of marriage."

"Oh. One of the Viscountess' relations, you mean?" Jonathan shrugs, pressing close, "Well, if she likes him..."

"Surely you're not blind to the boy's affections."

"You mean George?"

"Yes I mean George."

"Well I'd say you're a bit biased there," Jonathan teases.

"Don't you think they're a good match?" Dio presses. He's long since given up the fight to have Jonathan refer to George as his own son.

"I think you just want grandchildren."

Dio refuses to dignify the statement with a response. He hits Jonathan instead.

-  

Because Jonathan makes him promise not to intimidate (or outright eliminate) any of the other suitors, Dio needs to hedge his efforts elsewhere.

"So when the worthless little worm says this," Dio points to Hypothetical Adolescent #1 and his
Hypothetical Wooing Attempt #2, "What do you say?"

"I'm not interested," Lisa Lisa repeats.

"I'm not interested...?"

"I'm not interested you worthless little worm," she clarifies, rolling her eyes.

"Very good! And when some two-bit sniveling mongrel," he gestures at Hypothetical Adolescent #2 paired with Hypothetical Wooing Attempt #3, "Tries to buy you over with chocolate and flowers, what do you say?"

"You couldn't possibly afford me," Lisa Lisa dutifully replies.

"Make sure to toss your hair," Dio instructs. He demonstrates. "Like that."

"...Did godfather put you up to this?" Lisa Lisa asks, crossing her arms and looking entirely too suspicious for a young girl of seventeen.

"What? No! And on that note, could we keep this a secret from your godfather?"

His not-quite-niece raises an eyebrow.

"Look! Just don't bring it up, alright? Believe me," Dio adds, gesturing to his wall of law certificates and won court cases, "You'll thank me later."

"If you say so..." she uncertainly says.

Imagine his surprise then, when he comes home to the manor one summer afternoon to find George sobbing inconsolably in the parlor.

Dio crosses the twenty meters in a matter of seconds, placing a hand on the young man's heaving shoulders.

"George?" he says with the most gentleness he's capable of, "George, what's wrong?"

"It's -- it's Lisa Lisa...!"

"Is she with another man?!" Dio instantly demands, "But I thought I told her -- "

"No!" George interrupts, lifting his head to better explain, "It's worse! She called me... she called me..."

"Yes...?"

"A worthless little worm!" This is followed by more sobbing and choked-out insults.

Dio purses his lips, gently patting the boy's shoulder.

"It's a difficult time," he lamely puts forth, "But I'm sure everything will turn out fine in the end."

Jonathan and Constance accost him for A Talk later that night.
"George was crying," Jonathan says.

"Lisa Lisa was near hysterical herself."

"I told you not to get involved."

"Why on earth would you tell her that insults were a form of affection?!"

"And now George thinks she hates him!"

"And the poor girl has run out of insults!"

As one, the two of them glare at him.

"It was a misunderstanding," Dio sighs, rolling his eyes. "I'll sort this out tomorrow."

"They would have been perfectly happy without your involvement," Jonathan points out.

"And there will be grandchildren," Constance adds, green eyes flashing.

Despite Dio's attempts to help, George ends up having to fight off a whole squadron of suitors in order to ask for Lisa Lisa's hand. But he and Lisa Lisa do get married and their marriage unites (however obliquely) the houses of Donagan and Cross once more. And Constance gets to be a grandmother and Joseph Joestar is the first Joestar in four generations to know his paternal grandfather.

Although Jonathan does not lose hope and Constance keeps the truth from Lisa Lisa, both Cross and Donagan are declared legally dead in 1895. Dio successfully petitions for Lisa Lisa to inherit her father's overseas properties, though the title of Viscount (along with the familial residence) is unfortunately lost.

Wilcox and his wife go on to have four children, two girls followed by two boys. Webb's first wife dies in childbirth, leaving him with a son. He goes the route of the late Viscount Joestar by refusing all dances and any suggestions of remarriage thereafter.

Pyrce gets married in the old country up north and is made an uncle four times over. Though it takes him five more years to earn his second degree from Hugh Hudson, he eventually perseveres and actually overtakes Dio in legal knowledge. Wei makes a great name for himself in the East and successfully inherits his grandfather's law firm. He marries the lively girl he had brought along to Dio's wedding and the two of them adopt one of his nephews as heir.

Murray's reputation in Egyptology rises higher and higher until she is given a permanent teaching position at Hugh Hudson. She never marries and publishes well after retirement, dying at the age of a hundred and one. Nuttall and her husband gallivant about Americas, helping out on excavations here and there. They drop by for one of Jonathan's excavations, where he is surprised (and then, not at all) to find Pinart had pilfered one of the Italian codices. Nuttall outlives her husband by twenty-two years and gets a codex named after her decipherment as well as an
honorary professorship.

Speedwagon discovers an untouched oil field in 1908. Jonathan uses this stroke of luck to force his friend into the limelight of the business. The Speedwagon Foundation is founded in 1910 and the Joestar trading business is merged into it. Despite Speedwagon's protests, Jonathan signs over the majority of the family funds as a founding investment. As a sign of their friendship, Speedwagon establishes an archaeology division for Jonathan to head. Once George is settled into boarding school, Jonathan spends late spring and early summer on excavation. Dio comes along, and sometimes Speedwagon too, and the 1912 uncovering of the Star Pyramid is attended by the whole Joestar family. The first museum to house artifacts from Jonathan's excursions is, of course, the Speedwagon Museum of Mesoamerican Archaeology.

With regards to titles, Lord Donagan the Earl of Southampton passes away when his grandson is fifteen years old. George receives the title of Earl at age eighteen. Unfortunately, he does not outrank his father for long, succumbing to a second outbreak of the 1889 Russian influenza in 1921. His son Joseph never receives any title as he marries an Italian and becomes a citizen of the United States of America in 1940.

Something cracks in Lisa Lisa when her husband passes away. Unable to cope with motherhood as a widow, she flees to her teacher's teacher, coming back a decade and a half later to save her son's life. But really, the whole of the manor is sent reeling with grief for George had been so young, so golden -- the youngest Joestar to die by a long margin! There can be kindness in falsehood, Dio thinks, when he is seeing Jonathan's grief over the loss of a nephew. Constance and Speedwagon take the reins then, raising Joseph between London and New York. By the time he truly interacts with his grandfather and great-uncle, the boy is already in school!

"Grandfather," Jonathan's great-grandson says on his deathbed, "Grandfather, don't go."

And Dio wonders: should he confess? Jonathan has been dead for half a year and with his passing, he had remembered what true grief had felt like. It has been seventy years since his mother's death.

"Your grandfather loves you very much," he says instead, squeezing the young man's hand, "But he has been waiting long enough."

Dio Brando Joestar passes away at the age of eighty-two in 1950 surrounded by friends and family, outliving his son by twenty-nine years, his wife by five years and his cousin by five months. He is survived by the family friend and benefactor, R.E.O. Speedwagon, his grandson Joseph Joestar, and his great-granddaughter Holly Joestar.

"There is an empty space next to Mr. Joestar's grave," Speedwagon dictates, crying anew, "Your grandfather would want to be buried there."

/fin
What made you want to start? 
Three reasons! (1) hitting the kinks Maybe didn't cover, (2) building the backstory for a Dio who would act as he did in chapter 30 [namely, swearing on his father's name with a straight face], and (3) playing with villain's victory in the deck. I'm so glad this is a mature work so there's no need for disclaimers. There is this line from a murder mystery adaptation (itv's *Marple*) which inspired me:

The Detective, speaking to the Murderer's Lover who is also the sister of one of his victims after the crime is solved: *It's of no comfort, but it was a crime born of love.*

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Hardest part to write? 
Still the ending. Always the damn endings...

Easiest part to write? 
Any of the smut. Oh my god, you have no idea how long I've been waiting to write happy sappy mostly-consensual smut!

Best part? 
Tie between chapters 34 and 42. 34 is just like: YES, FINALLY!, whereas 42 is like: aaahhh my happy ending is in sight!

Worst part? 
The three month gap between chapters 22 and 23? No? Okay, probably chapters 1-3. I was really struggling with the time period then and it shows.

The moment everything was leading up to? 
Chapter 30. This whole story was intent on answering the question: "what sort of Dio would swear on his father's name without batting an eye?" If that one scene was believable, then my work here is done.

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Something you wish you had done differently? 
Not killed off Erina! Like, argh. The thing is, I wasn't planning on having George II and Lisa Lisa in the story so it wasn't that big of a deal then, but when I decided I wanted them, it's not like I could retcon her death. That being said, there are some things I can't make work, no matter how many hundreds of thousands of words I vomit out. Jonathan choosing Dio while Erina is alive is one of them. Doesn't mean I don't regret it though.

Something you're glad you got to include? 
A more meaningful epilogue! And excavation sex! Ahem. But Dio and Jonathan (mostly Dio) being facepalm-tier parents was a lot of fun.

Something you experimented with? 
Dialogues leading into one another! I think it's most apparent in 26 and 27; saw it used in an animated series and thought it'd be fun to play around with.
Favorite one liner?
Dio's *You don't know the half of it* from chapter 50. When I wrote it, I literally snapped my fingers and burst out laughing. It sums up the "Villain's Victory" perfectly which is, you know, the point of this fic.

Any chance for a sequel/prequel/fix-it?
My dear, they are both dead. Let them rest in peace.

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Are you satisfied with the end result?
Hmmm... more satisfied than not, but with a work this long there's a lot more cringeworthy writing. It's okay, I'm good at not dwelling on it!

What's up next?
Gen gen gen. Militant gen, even. I'm not very good at it but oh, I'll never get better without practice.

Final words?
Sorry again for the three month break. And the pause before the final update. I think this is goodbye for most of you, so thank you for all your attentions and encouragements and hopefully see you around, if not in this fandom then the next! <3

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Works inspired by this one
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!